

THE ROMANCE GROUP

5 COMPLETE ROMANCES!

5 Great Romances

~~\$2.00~~

SPECIAL \$1.75

SEPT.-OCT. 1986

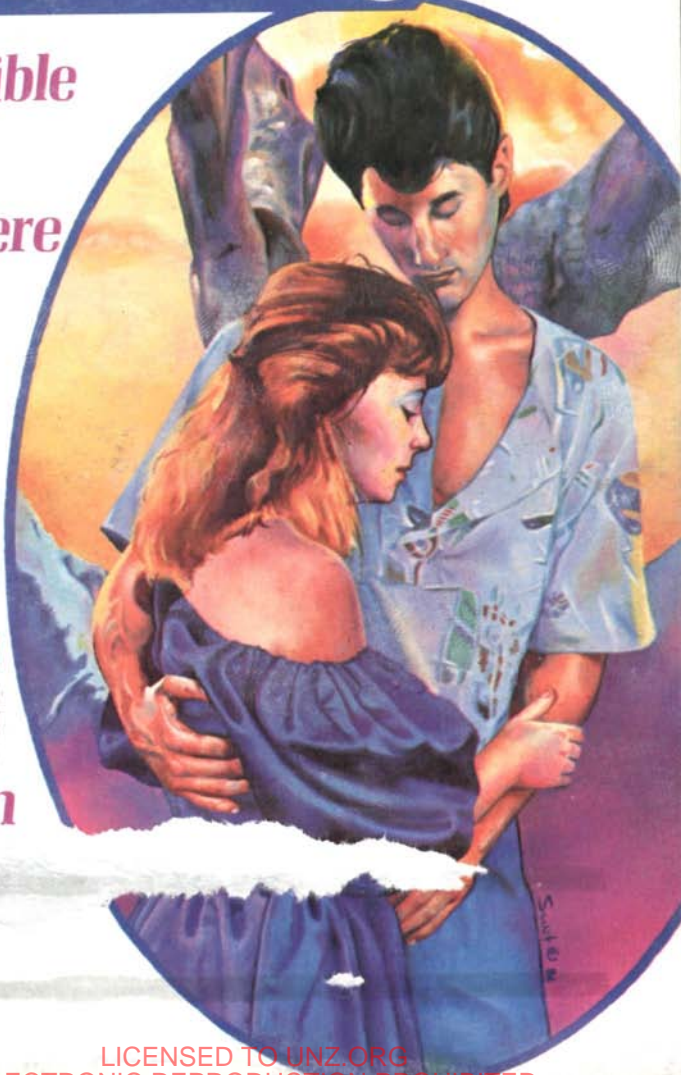
Irresistible Forces

Anywhere and Always

Ever Since Eve

Aegean Affair

Autumn Flare

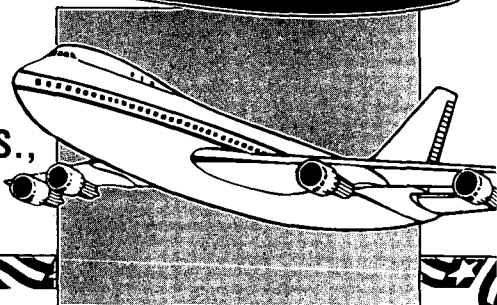


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FLIGHT TO ROMANCE SWEEPSTAKES!

GRAND PRIZE

A Free Trip For Two
Anywhere In The U.S.,
Plus One Week At
A First Class Hotel



- 100 PIECES CARRY ON LUGGAGE!
- IT'S EASY TO ENTER AND WIN!
- NO PURCHASE NECESSARY!

Yes, you can win this delightful trip for two anywhere in the United States. Imagine the romance of Hawaii, the excitement of Hollywood, the fantasy of New York... or simply use this trip to visit relatives or old friends. We'll jet you to the destination of your choice, put you up in first-class hotels. Plus 100 winners receive a designer piece of carry-on luggage.



IT'S EASY TO ENTER AND WIN!

You are automatically entered into the sweepstakes when you take advantage of our subscription offer. Just check the appropriate box on the attached Charter Subscription and Renewal Application, and fill in your name and address. No need to send money now. We'll start your subscription and bill you. No purchase necessary, see official rules.



OFFICIAL RULES

1. No Purchase Necessary to enter or win... check the appropriate "Yes" or "No" box on the Charter Subscription and Renewal Application, either way you are eligible for the prizes offered. 2. One entry per contestant. All entries must be received by April 1, 1987. Winners selected in random drawings from all entries received under the supervision of Marden-Kane, an independent judging organization whose decisions are final. Winners will be notified by mail. Versions of this sweepstakes with different prizes may appear in other Digest Publishing Magazines. Winners will receive the prize offered in their respective magazine. Grand Prize valued at \$5,000. Runner-up prizes valued at \$60, each. Winner acknowledged and agrees to have name and likeness used for publicity purposes. 3. Sweepstakes open to residents of the United States, except employees and their families of Digest Publishing Inc., Marden-Kane and their respective affiliated companies. All Federal, State and local regulations apply. Odds of winning determined by number of entries received. Trip subject to availability. Taxes are the responsibility of the prize winners. For the name of the Grand Prize Winner send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Marden-Kane, 410 Lakeville Road, Lake Success, NY 11042.

SENSED TO UNZ.ORG

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

5 Great Romances

SEP/OCT 1986 • VOLUME 4 NO. 5

CONTENTS

IRRESISTIBLE FORCES	by Marie Michael	2
ANYWHERE AND ALWAYS	by Lee Williams	32
AUTUMN FLAMES	by Sara Orwig	60
AEGEAN AFFAIR	by Lynnan Waters	90
EVER SINCE EVE	by Kasey Adams	117

A bi-monthly digest publication featuring five great romances in every issue... each a complete story.

All of the stories that appear in 5 Great Romances have been specially selected for inclusion, and all have been carefully edited so that they retain all of the flavor and meaning of the originals.

In each issue, 5 Great Romances brings to love and romance readers skillfully condensed stories packed with all the emotions, thrills, and excitement that have made them so popular.

5 Great Romances (ISSN 0738-0941) is published bi-monthly by Digest Publishing, Inc., J. Shapiro, President. Executive and editorial offices at 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024. Second Class postage paid at Fort Lee, N.J. and additional mailing offices. Subscription rates U.S. and possessions: 6 issues—\$9.50. Outside the U.S. \$10.00 additional per year. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to 5 Great Romances, 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07632. For subscription orders, changes of address, correspondence concerning subscriptions, write 5 Great Romances, 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024. Please enclose latest address label for quickest service when writing about subscription. Printed in U.S.A. ©Digest Publishing, Inc., 1986. All rights reserved.



LYNN LAUBER
MANAGING EDITOR

JOHN McCUEN
ART DIRECTOR

RICHARD Z. GONZALEZ
PRODUCTION MANAGER

MARTA MACIEL
COMPOSITOR

SUSAN MANSFIELD
SUBSCRIPTION
MANAGER

KIM SPELLMAN
ADVERTISING
SALES

COVER ILLUSTRATION
STEWART SUCHIT

Irresistible Forces

Shane McAllister considered her assignment to interview film star Nick Rutledge a demotion from her usual serious features. She expected him to be vain and shallow but discovered he was just as irresistible off the screen as on.

MARIE MICHAEL

The thready voice of Theodore Banks, editor-in-chief of *Rendezvous*, piped through the smoke-filled air in the ash-paneled conference rooms as he gave out assignments for the next issue of the magazine.

"Anderson, I've chosen you for the key interview with the President," Banks said as he glanced at Shane. "There'll be a secret service man waiting to meet you at National Airport."

Bill Anderson looked surprised at the plum assignment. Everyone had been sure Shane McCallister had the interview in the bag.

"And as for you, McCallister," Banks said. "I want a story on Nick Rutledge."

"The movie star?" Shane asked, shock making her voice quaver. This was unbelievable. Shane hardly thought that Nick Rutledge was an appropriate subject for a classy magazine like *Rendezvous*.

From IRRESISTIBLE FORCES by Marie Michael, a Loveswept Book. Copyright © 1984 by Marie Rydzynski. Reprinted by permission of Bantam Books, Inc. All rights reserved.

Beautiful Buy!

Compare at up to \$59.00!

NOW ONLY **\$19⁸⁸**

Premiere Editions Exclusive!

Victorian Lace

Only **\$19⁸⁸**



Copy of our own \$59.00 Designer Original.

Demure Innocence. Inspired by Great-Grandmother's photo album... Wear it whenever you want to look your prettiest. Nostalgia at its nicest... An exquisite lace yoke to frame your face, a lacy standup collar to complete the effect. Marvelous embroidery, lovely full-gathered sleeves. Whisper-soft White, Elegant Beige or Enchantress Black batiste, in carefree polyester/AVRIL™. Available only from Premiere Editions—Replica of our own \$59.00 famous-designer original. **Sizes 6 to 20. (210005A), \$19.88.**

FULLY GUARANTEED—

Nicest blouse you've bought this season—or return within 30 days for full refund of purchase price (except ship. & hdlg.). Our policy is to process all orders promptly. We charge your credit card only when order is shipped. Delays notified promptly. Shipment guaranteed within 60 days.

PREMIERE EDITIONS Hanover, PA 17333

— MAIL THIS NO-RISK COUPON TODAY! —

Premiere Editions, Dept. JM-7908

Bldg. #13, Hanover, PA 17333

Yes, please rush my Victorian Lace Blouse(s) (M210005A), Made in U.S.A., on full money-back guarantee.

COLOR(S)/SIZE(S): _____

- ☐ One Blouse for only \$19.88 plus \$2.75 shipping & handling.
☐ TWO for just \$38.75 plus \$3.25 ship. & hdlg.

Enclosed is \$ _____

CHARGE TO MY: ☐ Diners Club ☐ VISA
☐ American Express ☐ MasterCard

Acct. No. _____

Exp. Date _____ (please print)

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

ZIP _____

© H.H.I. Inc. 1986

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That 'movie star' is single-handedly responsible for bringing romance back into the movies. He's become a legend after only five years. The readers," Banks pronounced with imperial authority, "will be interested in learning about him. And," he added, "this needs a 'woman's touch.'"

"Then why don't you give the assignment to Anderson?" Shane asked, her voice very low, yet firm with anger. "His prose is much more flowery than mine."

"McCallister," Banks said in a slow, threatening roar before growing snappish. "I make the decisions around here. Now, be a good little writer and do as you're told. A good writer," he added archly, "is supposed to see the opportunity for excellence in an apparently routine assignment."

As she shook her head in exasperation, her shoulder-length chestnut hair brushed against the beige suit jacket she wore. "All right, I'll do your fluffy story. And when my copy is in print," she vowed, "no one will pay more than scant notice to the fact that the issue of the magazine under discussion has an interview with the President in it!" With that, she rose and stalked out of the conference room.

That was a dumb vow, Shane, she told herself as she marched into her office. Frustrated, she sank into her chair and ran her hand absently over her typewriter. They had come a long way, this typewriter and she, all the way from Hunter College, an eternity ago. The door opened, Meg, her short, slightly overweight blond secretary, looked at her a little uncertainly.

"Should I be waving a flag of truce?" she asked.

"I'm really just mad at myself," Shane confessed. "So come on in."

"Personally, I think you got the better end of the deal! Just think." Meg paused and gave a long sigh. "Oh dear Lord . . .

to be with Nick Rutledge . . . even for a day. Why—"

"Meg, knock it off. He's a product of Hollywood hype, that's all. Sure, he's probably good raw material in the looks department, but don't forget he's got an excellent makeup man. If you ran into him in the grocery store, I bet you'd hardly notice him," Shane said. "Probably has a Napoleonic complex to complement his subnormal IQ and stud mentality."

"Oh, Shane," Meg wailed. "so cynical. So unkind. That's not like you."

Shane relented. "Sorry Meg," she said humbly. "I'm just licking my wounds . . . or opening them. I'm going to make a damn good story out of this! Just wait until Banks sees the job I do!"

Meg slipped out of the office as Shane stared across the room at nothing in particular.

It was raining when Shane landed in Denver two days later for her interview with Nick Rutledge, who was on location for a film. "Anderson gets a secret service man to meet him, I get rain," she muttered as she juggled two suitcases.

People were scrambling for taxis, so she set down her suitcases and waited for a few minutes before whistling loudly to get a driver's attention. Soon she was sitting inside a dry cab and even sooner, it seemed, she was standing before the registration desk of the Plaza Cosmopolitan Hotel, where she found a rather frantic young man of about nineteen asking questions of the man behind the desk.

"Don't you have a reservation for a Mr. Shane McCallister?" the youth at her elbow asked.

Shane put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm Shane McCallister."

The young man, obviously quite surprised asked: "You—you're Shane McCallister? But you're not a man!"

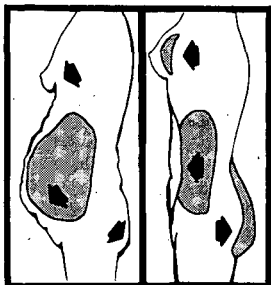
"Really?" she asked wryly. "Sorry to

LOSE FAT and FLAB...

Tone up your whole body
in just 5 minutes a day!

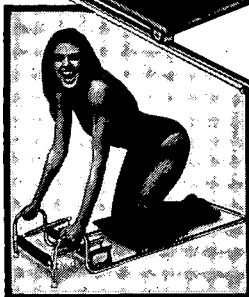
Now
Only **\$8.88**

Maxi Rower
with
Moving Seat



Lack of
Muscle Tone Good
Muscle Tone

**FREE Exercise
Instructions**
Deluxe quality—
Easy assembly



For Men & Women

**AS SEEN ON TV
AT \$39.95!**

A SLIM, TRIM SILHOUETTE...

In Just 5 Minutes A Day!

GUARANTEED RESULTS YOU CAN'T LOOK AND FEEL ATTRACTIVE WITHOUT GOOD MUSCLE STRUCTURE Now get rid of those embarrassing bumps, bulges, large stomach, flabby breast and buttocks. Feel younger, and help prevent cellulite buildup... Have a nice shape with no tummy. Measurable results in just a few weeks—*guaranteed*. GREAT FOR MEN, WOMEN, TEENS—Do the easy, enjoyable exercises for only 5 minutes a day!

TRY IT FOR 30 DAYS ON FULL MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE—If you don't look and feel better in just 30 days, return it for *total refund* of purchase price (except ship. & hdg.). Our policy is to process all orders promptly. We charge your credit card only when order is shipped. Delays notified promptly. Shipment guaranteed within 60 days.

**Old Village
Shop
Hanover, PA
17333**

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED—MAIL TODAY!

**OLD VILLAGE SHOP, Dept. VZ-4633
Bldg. #9, Hanover, PA 17333**

Yes, I want a Slim-Trim Figure. Please send me:

- ☐ One Maxi Rower (Z561522) at a special price of \$8.88 plus \$5.95 for hvwyt shipping & handling.
☐ **SAVE!** Order two (2) for the super low price of \$17.00 plus \$9.95 heavyweight shipping & handling.

Encl. is \$_____ (PA & NV res. add sales tax)

CHARGE TO MY: ☐ Diners Club ☐ VISA

☐ American Express ☐ MasterCard

Acct. No. _____

Exp. Date _____ (Please print)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

© H.H.I., Inc. 1986

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

disappoint."

His eyes swept over her curvaceous body, came to rest on her face, then blinked rapidly in embarrassment. He awkwardly stuck out his hand. "Hi. I'm Scottie."

"Well, Scottie," Shane said patiently, shaking his hand, "what can I do for you?"

"It's what I'm supposed to be doing for you!" he said. "I was supposed to pick you up at the airport, but I was looking for a man."

"Why don't you tell me the rest of it in the car?" she asked abruptly. She hastily checked in, asking to have her bags taken to her room. Then she turned back to Scottie, a brilliant smile from her putting him at ease. "Lead, on, MacDuff," she said . . . , and he did, straight through the lobby and out to a limousine drawn up to the curb.

"I'll sit up front with you," she announced, then let him open the passenger door for her.

Scottie slid into the driver's seat. "Boy, is Nick going to be in for a surprise," he told her.

"Why?"

"He was expecting a guy," Scottie told her. "I never knew a lady named Shane before."

She understood and smiled. "My father was planning on a boy. Once I made my appearance, the name just stuck."

She looked out the window as they reached Denver's outskirts and kept going. "Where are you shooting the movie?"

"Due south of Denver, just outside of Kiowa. We were at a standstill when I left," he told her, "what with the rain and all."

She nodded, taking out her pad. No time like the present.

"Tell me all about Nick Rutledge," she said in a confidence-inspiring, enthusias-

tic tone.

"He's just the best there is," Scottie answered, his face beaming.

"What is it you do for him, Scottie?"

"I'm a gofer." Scottie grinned. "I run errands for him, take care of little details, you know."

Shane suppressed a grimace. "Yes, I know, but do you earn enough money being a gofer—I mean, doing these errands to live on?"

Scottie shook his head. "Of course not. I don't do this all the time, just summers. I go to school the rest of the year. USC," he added proudly.

"Oh, I see. I suppose your folks pay for that."

Scottie laughed. "My mom couldn't afford the University of Southern California. If it weren't for Nick, I wouldn't be going at all."

"Nick?" she repeated blankly.

"Yeah," he responded enthusiastically. "He's paying for all of it."

"Why is he being so charitable?" she asked bluntly.

"Charitable?" Scottie guffawed. "My dad was a stuntman in one of his movies three years ago. Got killed in a freak accident. Nick felt responsible."

Ah, an angle! "And was he?" Shane prodded.

"No," Scottie said, sounding surprised that she would even ask such a question. "Wasn't anyone's fault. Dad was doubling for Nick in a dangerous stunt with a real high leap at the end of it. There was a big wind factor he hadn't counted on and somehow he missed the center part of the air bag. Broke his neck and just about everything else." Scottie was silent for a moment. "Nick was the one who came and told us about it. He was damned choked up . . . really, well, kind."

With his money, Nick could well afford to be kind, Shane thought, but nevertheless she was moved by Scottie's loss.

DID YOU MISS ANY BACK ISSUES?



NOW AVAILABLE BY MAIL!

Back issue supplies of 5 GREAT ROMANCES, WORLD'S GREATEST LOVE STORIES and LOVE TREASURES are limited. When sold out they will not be reprinted. NOW is the time to fill your collection with issues you missed while they still last. Simply check the issues you wish to order in the coupon below. Enclose \$2.00 for each issue then add 50¢ to the total to cover postage and handling.

Every issue contains 5 romances filled with love, romance excitement and great reading pleasure. Be sure you own every back issue to make your collection complete.

DIGEST PUBLISHING, INC., 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024.

Please send me the following back issues: (check issues desired)

5 GREAT ROMANCES

- ☐ NOV-DEC 82
- ☐ OCT 83
- ☐ NOV-DEC 83
- ☐ JAN-FEB 84
- ☐ MAR-APR 84
- ☐ MAY-JUN 84
- ☐ JUL-AUG 84
- ☐ SEP-OCT 84
- ☐ NOV-DEC 84
- ☐ MAR-APR 85
- ☐ MAY-JUN 85
- ☐ JUL-AUG 85
- ☐ SEP-OCT 85
- ☐ NOV-DEC 85
- ☐ JAN-FEB 86
- ☐ MAR-APR 86
- ☐ MAY-JUN 86
- ☐ JUL-AUG 86

WORLD'S GREATEST LOVE STORIES

- ☐ JUN 83
- ☐ JUL 83
- ☐ AUG 83
- ☐ SEP 83
- ☐ NOV-DEC 83
- ☐ JAN-FEB 84
- ☐ MAR-APR 84
- ☐ MAY-JUN 84
- ☐ SEP-OCT 84
- ☐ NOV-DEC 84
- ☐ MAR-APR 85
- ☐ MAY-JUN 85
- ☐ JUL-AUG 85
- ☐ SEP-OCT 85
- ☐ JAN-FEB 86
- ☐ MAR-APR 86
- ☐ MAY-JUN 86
- ☐ JUL-AUG 86

LOVE TREASURES

- ☐ JAN-FEB 86
- ☐ VOL. I-No. 2
- ☐ VOL. I-No. 3

**LIMITED
OFFER!**

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ ZIP _____

LICENSED STATE .ORG

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm sorry about your father," she murmured.

"Dad died doing what he liked best. He loved the business."

For the next twenty minutes he droned on and on about his idol. Then they arrived at the set. Scottie brought the car to a stop as close as possible to the entrance of the main tent. He had no way of knowing that it was also next to a puddle of mud. Neither did Shane . . . until she stepped into it getting out of the car. Her right shoe slid into the oozing mass, the mud sucking at her toes through the open, high-heeled sandal.

"Can I be of any help?"

The deep voice rumbled at Shane. She didn't even have to look up to know that voice belonged to Nick Rutledge.

Shane stood, lopsided, with the strap of her formerly light brown shoe dangling from her fingertips. She definitely wasn't putting her best foot forward to meet America's latest heartthrob.

"Cinderella, I presume," said the resonant voice, taking the shoe from her fingers.

For one of the very first times in her life, as she looked up into his face, Shane was at a loss for words. The man was obviously laughing at her. She should have been annoyed with him but his physical presence was rather overwhelming, and for the moment she was reduced to speechlessness.

The man's face was flawless—absolutely, completely flawless. He really did look the same off-screen as on! His high cheekbones gave his face a sensual look that blended magnificently with the neatly trimmed Van Dyke beard and moustache he sported. The only thing that kept Nick Rutledge from having "Perfect" stamped on his forehead was the fact that he had gray eyes. A face like that should have had sky-blue eyes. This

was probably God's way of showing the world that no one is perfection personified.

She suddenly realized that while she'd been studying him, Nick had been doing some minute inspecting of his own. She tossed her proud head, the motion pushing her abundant chestnut hair over her shoulder. She couldn't help wondering how well she scored in his opinion. She was not one to underestimate any of her attributes, and she knew that what Nick was seeing was a woman whom some had called beautiful.

Nick's gray eyes, shifted to Scottie, who still stood awkwardly at Shane's side. "You picked an awful day to bring your girl friend to the set, Scottie." He gave Shane a wide smile. "Let me see if I can help you salvage the situation. Here, take this to the prop area and have them clean it up," Nick told Scottie, handing him the shoe.

Shane was totally unprepared for what happened next. As Scottie hurried away on his mission, Nick scooped her up in his arms and carried her into the center of the activity, beneath a tent.

"Mabel, I need a towel," Nick called out, depositing Shane on a blue studio chair.

A nondescript person suddenly thrust a towel into Nick's hand. He took it without ever breaking eye contact with Shane.

"What is it you think you're doing?" Shane demanded, finally finding her voice. She stared as Nick began wiping the mud away from her leg.

"Getting you cleaned up, of course," Nick said innocently.

Shane snatched the towel away from him. "I can do this myself, thank you," she informed him.

Nick, squatting before her, simply watched. Shane grew self-conscious.

"Do you have to stare like that?" she

asked.

"Best-looking leg I've seen in a long time," Nick told her. "Too bad it belongs to Scottie."

"It doesn't belong to Scottie," she informed him.

"Oh, good; then, there's hope," Nick said, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Here's the shoe, Miss McCallister," Scottie called out, returning to the scene. "I'm really sorry."

"McCallister?" Nick echoed, looking very surprised.

"I'm Shane McCallister," she told him, rising.

"I thought you were supposed to be a man," he said.

"I failed the physical," she said dryly.

His eyes swept over the length and breadth of her. "So I see." He looked amused at his own mistake, taking the shoe Scottie offered. "Here, let me," and, not waiting for an answer, he bent down and took her newly cleaned foot in his hand.

Dear Heaven! She'd never known that having someone touch the sole of her foot could feel so . . . so erotic.

"All *Rendezvous* told me was that Shane McCallister was coming out to interview me, and with a name like Shane, I just naturally assumed you were a man."

"If I were a man, I wouldn't be here doing this interview," Shane said.

"Well, Shane, you won't have to be doing it anyway. I've changed my mind. No interview," he told her.

"Wait, don't be hasty," she said, putting a hand on his arm in order to keep him from walking away.

Nick stopped. "Okay," he said, eyeing her closely. "Convince me."

"Why this sudden wavering from no to yes to no again?" she asked.

"Reporters lie," he answered simply. "In a weak moment, my agent talked me into giving an interview."

"What about your fans?" Shane countered. "You haven't given a personal interview in two years."

"I'm very grateful to my fans," he said in a sincere way. "What about them?"

"Don't you think that they deserve a story right from your own lips?" she asked. "I don't know if you are personally acquainted with our magazine, Mr. Rutledge, but we do in-depth intimate profiles on people."

"How intimate?" he asked slyly.

She chose to ignore his question and its obvious inference. "—and I never alter facts."

"Nice to know," he commented, then took a deep breath. "I like your perfume."

"Fine," she said dismissively. "Does that cinch the deal?"

"We have a deal," he said in a sudden, reversal. He reached for her hand and shook it.

Shane smiled, relieved. "Good. Now, if you would be so kind as to direct me to your secretary or whoever has your schedule for the next month, I'll try to plan my life around yours—"

"I like that," he said, smiling in a devilish way.

That smile made her nervous, but she thought she hid it well. "Then, we have an understanding?"

"I hope so." The words were almost purred.

She was in deep trouble. She knew it by the way her insides felt. It was going to be a hell of a month. Better set him straight now, her mind warned, before it was too late. "Mr. Rutledge," she said, "I am a professional, and I am here strictly for the purpose of doing an interview."

"That remains to be seen. And my friends call me Nick." With that, he winked, and excused himself for a moment.

"Didn't I tell you he was great?" Scot-

tie asked.

Shane had forgotten about him. She seemed to have forgotten a lot of things in Nick's presence. She didn't like men who unnerved her. The only other man who had accomplished that feat was Alan Sherman, and she had married him. Six months later, clutching her divorce papers in her hands, she had formed a hard opinion of overwhelmingly good looking men.

Shane let Scottie ramble on amiably as she tried to regain her outward calm.

Nick returned in five minutes. "Gypsy's getting a schedule together for you right now," he said.

"Gypsy?" she asked.

"My secretary."

He would have a secretary named Gypsy, Shane thought. Somehow it fit.

"Have you had dinner?" he asked.

"I had a sandwich on the plane," she told him.

"Sandwiches don't count," he assured her, taking her hand.

"Wait a minute," she protested before she was whisked away. "Aren't you in the middle of shooting? How can you leave?"

"I can leave because we're not shooting. The weatherman says there's no relief in sight, so we stop shooting. Satisfied?" She nodded. "Good. Give me a minute to change—unless"—he paused, a smile curling the corners of his mouth—"you'd like to describe the way I get out of my costume."

Her face did not move a muscle as she replied icily, "The interview is not supposed to be that intimate."

"Too bad. Scottie, show Shane around the set and bring her back here to meet me in ten minutes."

"C'mon," Scottie urged. "You'll like everybody." He introduced her to a host of cameramen, propmen, stunt men and women, and supporting actors.

Shane had just met the wardrobe mistress when Nick returned. He thanked Scottie, then hustled Shane across the set. He opened an umbrella and held it over her head as he guided her toward his car.

He opened the car door. There was nothing to do but get in, which she did. "You don't have to take me out to dinner," she insisted.

"Oh, but I do," he said. Then he hastily went around the car and in on his side. "What's your pleasure?" Nick asked.

She wasn't sure she was hearing correctly. "What?"

"Food." Nick laughed. "Do you like French, Chinese, seafood, what?" he asked.

"Seafood," she answered, grasping at the first thing that sounded right.

"Terrific," Nick acknowledged with a broad grin. "I know a fantastic restaurant with magnificent seafood."

The restaurant was charming, and the *maitre d'* seemed genuinely delighted to see Nick. They were ushered to a very private corner table. Nick asked her if she'd like a cocktail. She ordered sherry which was served immediately, along with a glass of chilled chablis for Nick.

"You come here often?" she asked.

Nick smiled, his smile penetrating her veins more swiftly than the sherry she'd just sipped. "Whenever I can. Don't forget, I live in Hollywood when I'm not on location."

She toyed with the stem of her goblet, avoiding the hypnotic effect of his eyes. "I understand you had complete control over casting and location. Why did you pick Colorado?"

The question seemed to please him. "There are certain locations here that look very romantic when the sun hits them just so. I think it adds a lot to the movie."

"Can't the sun 'hit just so' in California?"

"Maybe," he conceded, picking up a piece of bread and buttering it. "But I grew up in Colorado—"

"So you decided you'd throw the locals a little money?" she asked.

"Something like that," he said. Then he put down his knife. "Correct me if I'm wrong, Shane, but I'm getting definite vibrations from you."

Uh-oh, here comes the macho pitch, she thought.

"Why don't you like me?" he continued softly.

Her eyes grew wide. Was he as perceptive as all that? Was she as obvious as all that? What struck her most was that Nick appeared to sound sincere, as if it mattered to him that one, lone woman wasn't falling at his feet. Maybe it did matter, she thought. No conquest unturned . . . "I don't *dislike* you, Mr. Rutledge—"

"Nick" he corrected.

"Nick," she amended. "I'm just not quite sure how to take you."

"In whole doses," he said helpfully. His eyes danced over her features.

Shane lowered hers. "I think I'll have the shrimp salad," she said, lifting the menu between them. She could hear Nick's soft chuckle.

The waitress came and went, as did their dinner. Time slipped away, and Shane got nowhere with her interview. Every question she framed sounded stilted, amateurish. It was a bad evening for her.

"Would you like to go dancing?" he asked as he put a large bill on the table and helped Shane out of the booth.

"I'd like to go to my room," she told him.

"That can be arranged," he said. Somehow she knew they didn't have the same thing in mind.

"I meant alone."

"I'd never let a stranger go back to her lonely hotel room alone. Besides," he

said, dangling the keys before her, "I have the car keys."

Shane took his arm and went out into the night. It had stopped raining.

"You're sure you want to go back to the hotel?" Nick asked again as his Ferrari was brought around for them

"I'm sure," she said firmly.

She wasn't feeling all that firm when he stepped out of the car with her at the hotel and followed her across the lobby into the elevator and to her room.

"Well, this is my door," she said, fishing for her key.

"Very nice door," he commented impishly. "Is the other side as nice?"

"I imagine so. Probably the same color and everything," she replied, amused despite herself.

"Really?" He laughed. "I'd like to see it."

She laughed too as she opened it. "See?" She held it for his inspection.

"Yes, I do see," Nick said, looking only at her as he closed the door behind him.

Nick's gray eyes watched her steadily as she moved quickly into the room and turned on a light. "I don't leap at moving targets, if that's what you're afraid of."

She lifted her chin defiantly. "I'm not afraid."

"Then, come here," he said, his voice as inviting as a touch of velvet.

Shane found herself moving toward him, as if she had no control over her own legs. "We're supposed to be maintaining a professional relationship here," she heard herself protest.

"Lady, you talk too much," Nick said as he took her face in both hands. His lips touched hers, at first, very, very gently. So gently that she thought she was dreaming. But as the pressure increased with the passing of seconds, Shane knew that this was no dream. Horrified, she caught herself and pushed him back.

"That is not the way to end a kiss, Shane. You kind of taper off. You don't use a body block," he said, highly amused. "We're going to have to practice that."

"We're not 'practicing' anything," she informed him, her voice shaky.

"Rehearsals can be fun," he assured her.

"Look, I'm very tired." Shane marched to the door and opened it.

"You didn't kiss like a tired lady," he said, grinning. "I think I'm going to like having an in-depth interview done." His eyes caressed her once more. "Sweet dreams," he murmured, then left.

Shane locked the door, leaning against it. A deep sigh escaped her lips. The fire of his kiss still burned.

A brisk, staccato knock echoed its way into Shane's consciousness. She groped for the clock, nearly falling between the bed and the nightstand. Six-oh-seven. There was someone up at six-oh-seven. On a Saturday? Maybe the hotel was on fire! "Oh, Lord," she muttered, grabbing her violet negligee as she jumped out of bed. Quickly she unlocked the door and threw it open. Shane found herself swept up into an embrace one moment before her mind registered it was Nick standing in her doorway. Her mouth was covered with forceful lips that seemed to suck her very breath away. For one wild moment she felt herself being carried away. In an effort at self-preservation, Shane wedged her hands up between herself and the assailant. With a mighty shove, she broke free.

"I just wanted to know if you kiss as well in the morning as you do at night. You do—but we're really going to have to work on your endings," Nick told her, strolling into the room.

Shane shut the door behind him. "You are the most egotistical, insufferable—"

Nick held up a finger. "Now, now, I didn't say I kissed well. I said you did. In case you hadn't noticed, that was a compliment."

Shane ran her fingers through her hair, pushing it out of her face. "I don't notice anything at six in the morning. Any decent person should be in bed at this hour!"

"I'm for that," Nick said. To her horror, he walked over to her bed and started to take off his jacket.

"That wasn't an invitation!" she said sharply.

Nick snapped his fingers. "Too bad." He looked at the rumpled bed. "You always sleep that messy?" he asked.

"Keep my sleeping habits out of this, please?" Shane answered.

Nick went on as if she hadn't said anything. "Me, I sleep like a log for about five hours. That's all your body needs, really. The rest of the time is wasted, unless you're not alone. Then it can be spent very fruitfully."

"I'm not interested in bearing fruit," she said. From the grin on his face, she realized that her choice of words was poor, to say the least. "What are you doing here?" she demanded again.

"I've come to introduce you to the dawn, Shane. I have a strong suspicion you've never seen it."

"Dawn?" she echoed, her voice just a touch hysterical. "You're crazy, do you know that? I'm standing here, in my nightgown—"

"So I noticed," he cut in.

"—carrying on a wild conversation with a crazy man who never seems to sleep. Are all you Hollywood people like this?"

"I'm unique." He winked at her. "That's why you're doing this story. Remember?" He pulled a paper out of his jacket pocket and unfolded it before holding it out to her.

"What's this?" she asked, snatching the piece of white bond.

"You wanted my schedule for the next month, remember?"

Shane scanned the list. The first thing she saw was: Saturday, September 10th, Gloria's party. Bring Shane. That was today.

"What's this?" she asked him, jabbing her forefinger at the words.

Nick moved around to look over her shoulder. "Oh, that. You'll like it," he assured her. "Gloria gives terrific parties. She's one of my backers."

"I'm not prepared for a party," Shane protested.

"Just bring yourself," he said. "That's being prepared enough." His hands started running over her shoulders. She stiffened, trying to prevent his touch from affecting her.

"Hey, you're all tense. I can feel the knots standing out three inches high. Here, let me," he proffered, and without further comment, he went on to do just what she didn't want him to. He began to massage her, kneading her tight muscles and playing havoc with her insides.

Slowly, he turned her around, his hands barely brushing against the outline of her breasts, making every nerve in her body stand at attention. He tilted her head back with the point of one finger and his lips were on the smooth white plane of her throat, sending a throbbing ache all through her.

Bells. She was hearing bells. The telephone! She felt herself being released. Shane clutched at it as if it were her lifeline back to sanity. "Hello?" Was that her voice? It sounded so shaky.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Shane. I forgot about the time difference. Did I wake you?" It was Meg.

Thank God for Meg, Shane thought. "No, that's all right. I wasn't in bed."

"Almost," Nick whispered into her

other ear.

She grabbed up the white phone and went as far away from Nick as the long cord permitted—which was halfway into the tiny bathroom.

"I couldn't wait to find out. What's he really like?" Meg asked breathlessly.

"Like nothing you'd ever imagine," Shane said before she could stop herself. A chuckle from the other room drifted into the bathroom. "Look, I can't talk right now, Meg. Let me call you back,"

"Fine, I'll be—" Meg never got a chance to finish her sentence as Shane hung up. She marched back into the other room, determined to get Nick out before something else happened.

"Now, where were we before we were so rudely interrupted?" he asked, coming toward her.

"I was throwing you out of my room," she replied.

"That's not quite how I remember it," he murmured. "I bet you're as pure as the newly fallen snow."

"The condition of my 'snow' is none of your business," she retorted.

But Nick wasn't deterred by her cold voice. "Haven't you ever been involved with anything except your work?"

"I'm supposed to be asking all the questions, remember?" she said. But Nick said nothing, apparently waiting for her to answer him. After a beat, she shrugged. "I was married once," she said, trying to sound offhanded about it.

"And?" Nick asked, waiting.

What did it matter? she thought. "Alan was a handsome god with feet of clay and a girl behind every door. It lasted six months. So much for true confessions. Now, since you've gotten me up, I might as well shower and get dressed."

"Fine by me," Nick agreed. "Need anyone to scrub your back?"

"No thank you," Shane answered as she quickly snatched some clothes out of

her suitcase. Hoping she had everything she needed, she barricaded herself in the bathroom.

She took a fast shower, dried herself and applied her makeup. She had neglected to bring her bra and now the blue-gray jersey adhered tantalizingly to the full, firm outline of her breasts. Maybe he wouldn't notice.

He noticed. One glance at his face told her it was the first thing that registered with him. He looked more than a trifle pleased.

"Now what?" she asked.

"Well, since we missed sunrise, what if we go to some nice, cozy nook for breakfast and you start to work. Wasn't that the agreement? You spend time with me and find out what typical days in my life are like?"

"Yes, that's the agreement," she said.

"Well, then, let's go," he said, handing her purse to her.

The restaurant was charming, rather like a large, rambling country kitchen. The waitress looked a little sleepy-eyed as she took their orders.

Shane pulled her tape recorder from her oversized shoulder bag, pressed the "play record" button and turned her attention to her assignment.

"It's been said that you've brought romance and light fantasy back to the silver screen. How do you feel about that?" she asked.

"It's not me, Shane," he said forthrightly. "It's the type of stories I choose to do. People need to believe in heroes and derring-do again. They need to go to another time and place for two hours, to become enveloped in something nobler, finer, more meaningful than weeds and mortgage payments. That's all I want my movies to accomplish."

"To fill them with empty dreams?"

"Dreams don't have to be empty," he

insisted. "But first they have to be. You have to have a dream in order to fulfill it," he explained when she looked at him quizzically. "I show them that hope and optimism still exist, that things can be overcome if they only try."

"Isn't that rather cruel?" Shane prodded, furrowing her brow. "What if they lose?"

"How will they know unless they try?" he countered. "You've got to risk a little to gain a little—sometimes to gain a lot."

"And sometimes you lose a lot," she pointed out.

He conceded that. "Yes, you do, but sometimes that extra ounce of optimism helps get you over the brink."

"Just how did someone with your noble thoughts get into this line of work?" she asked.

"I got into it by accident," he confessed. The waitress brought their orders, and Nick cut into his sausage with gusto. "I was going to USC, and a friend of mine was eager to read for a new director. It was a two-man part, and Johnny thought he'd do better if he had someone to read with him, so I went along. Johnny got the part he was after, a twelve-liner. The director took me to John Bowman, who was casting the lead in Robin Hood. Something clicked and I was on my way." He made it sound so simple.

"What were you doing at USC?" she asked.

"Studying to be a lawyer," he confessed. She looked surprised, and he laughed. "Lawyers need good memories too, so memorizing lines comes easy to me. Besides, being an actor is a lot more fun." He confided with a wicked wink.

"Then it's a game to you?"

"Rather a serious game," he said, "when the paychecks of X number of people depend on your doing a good job and doing it on time. No, I take my work very seriously. I just enjoy it. That's what

life is all about"—he paused and there was only a hint of a twinkle in his eyes now—"finding what you like to do and doing it."

"You're lucky you can follow your philosophy."

He took her hand. "Yes, I am."

Shane's uneasiness returned.

He brought her to his home.

When he first suggested it, Shane had anticipated a small, secluded apartment. She was not prepared for the large, contemporary, wood-and-glass two-story house standing on the crest of a mountain above Denver.

"I thought you said you lived in California," she said as she looked around the massive living room.

"I do, but this is home. I'm a native Coloradoan, remember?" The pressure of his hand on her shoulder blades urged her forward.

"Yes," she muttered. That was on the first tape somewhere. She looked up at the huge vaulted ceiling, wondering what a person could do with all this living space. Her tiny apartment could fit in this one living room.

"Hi."

Shane turned around and saw Scottie coming toward them. He was wearing a robe and brown-dotted pajama legs poked out below its hem.

"I didn't know you were an early riser like Nick," he said, joining them.

"Not voluntarily," Shane said. "Do you live here?"

"I promised his mother I'd look out for him," Nick told her, answering for Scottie.

"Can I show you around?" Nick offered as he slipped an almost possessive hand around her small waist, pulling her closer to him. "Perhaps you'd like to see my casting couch?"

Scottie laughed, then excused himself

to get dressed.

"I think we'll skip the couch," Shane said, backing out of his embrace.

Nick's eyes sparkled as he led her away for a tour of the house's twenty rooms. From the decking outside the second-story game room, Shane looked down on a valley dotted with houses and cars. She let out an impressed soft whistle.

Nick grinned. "It is kind of like looking down from a castle, isn't it?" he asked.

She turned toward him, finding him even more magnificent than the view below her. "Maybe you're taking your roles too heart. Aren't you afraid of getting type-cast?" she asked.

He laughed. "I already am," he told her. "And it doesn't bother me one bit. I have no great ambition as an actor. When the time comes when I can no longer scale mountains to free young damsels in distress, I'll move on to other parts. Right now, I'm having a ball. It's nice being paid for being a hero."

"Nice work if you can get it," Shane conceded, smiling. "Okay, now what?"

"Now I take you to my chamber of horrors," he told her glibly.

"Would you care to be a little more specific?" she prodded as he took her hand and led her from the terrace.

"I have a gym on the first floor," he clarified. "I try to work out at least a little each day. The studio heads would be very disappointed with a flabby hero," he added with a grin. "C'mon, you can watch."

If someone had asked Shane a week ago to name five activities that would have bored her to tears, she would have put watching someone work out at the top of the list. Yet here she was, actually looking forward to seeing Nick go through his paces.

Nick went to change, and she was alone in the large room, alone with mysterious tangles of machinery that were guar-

anteed to insure a good, professional workout.

Shane was leaning forward against the ballet barre along the wall and trying to recall stretching exercises that had been part of her life when she was a teenager, when Nick entered the room. She caught his reflection first. Involuntarily, she sucked in her breath.

Slowly she turned around, trying not to be obvious as she drank in his form. She was staring, looking for a flaw, a scar, *something* that would render this superb man more human. She failed.

"You can sit over there." He pointed out a chair in the corner. "I promise not to take too long. This is all probably very boring to you."

She nodded and went to the chair, but mentally she disagreed with him. Nothing about him seemed to be boring to her. Finding a sharp, new angle with which to write her article was getting to be harder and harder. Taking out her pad, she sat with her pencil poised and ready, waiting for inspiration to strike.

The only inspiration that struck had nothing to do with writing a good story.

"How about a dip in the pool?" Nick asked when he was finished, towering over Shane as he wiped the gleam of perspiration from his face.

She hastily closed her pad, which had gained nothing but three elaborate doodles in the last hour. "It's kind of cool outside for that," she said.

"It isn't outside," he informed her. "I've got an indoor pool right on the other side of the gym."

Shane rolled her eyes heavenward. "Doesn't everyone?" She followed him through the gym.

The rectangular pool, with its crystal-blue water, shimmered invitingly. But there was a problem. "I don't have a bathing suit," she pointed out.

"So?" he asked innocently. "I promise I won't look."

"I'm sitting this one out, thank you," she said drolly. She was about to drop her purse into a lounge chair as she heard Nick say, "Can't blame a guy for trying." When she turned back to look at him, she saw him rummaging through a closet built into the side wall.

"Here, this will fit you," he said, producing something out of its innards that looked like tangled black string.

"This isn't a bathing suit," she protested as she took it. "It's a doily. Where did you get it?"

"That's an undelivered gift," he told her. "The lady it was meant for went her separate way a long time ago. Try it on," he urged.

There were all sorts of reasons why she shouldn't put it on, she told herself, standing in the adjoining powder room. She couldn't even swim. Put your clothes back on, her common sense instructed her as she turned the doorknob and went out.

For one moment, the voice of her common sense retreated to less than a whisper as she basked in Nick's obvious admiration.

"See, I told you it'd fit. I have a good eye."

Nick took hold of her hand and was drawing her toward the water. She had an inkling of what his intention was, before panic seized her.

"No, really, I don't think this is a good idea," she protested, "I—"

Playfully, he picked her up and threw her into the water, then dove in after her. She opened her mouth to protest more as she hit the surface. Chlorinated water rushed into her mouth, filling it and choking her. She was sinking, sinking. . .

And then there was air, air all around her, cold and good. Gentle hands were placing her on something flat and hard. She began to cough violently. When she

finally opened her eyes, she saw Nick's concerned face looming over her.

"Are you all right?"

She tried to nod. "Yes," she said in a raspy whisper.

"Why didn't you tell me you couldn't swim?" he demanded. "Lord, I'm sorry. Sometimes I do things impulsively."

She felt foolish as she shrugged her shoulders weakly. "I didn't want to admit it," she muttered.

His expression—one of concern mingled with apology—took all her self-righteous anger away. How could she berate him, when he was obviously feeling so badly about it? Nick stroked her cheek gently, his fingers gliding down to her chin. Ever so slowly, his mouth descended to hers, making her taste his kiss before it had been born.

He was on his knees, drawing her up against him, molding her soft contours against his hardening body, making her feel as if they were two halves of a whole. His hands were everywhere, stroking her wet skin and making it blaze with passion.

"Hi! You hungry—oh!"

Scottie's exuberant voice slashed the air. Reality crashed around Shane and she struggled for composure. Nick had released her and was now standing with his back to her, providing protective cover for her.

"I—I brought sandwiches," Scottie said lamely.

"That was very nice of you. I-I nearly drowned," Shane said, rising awkwardly to her feet. "Your boss thought it might be funny if he threw me in the pool," she went on. "Unfortunately, I don't swim, and he had to rescue me."

"Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation can be rewarding," Nick told Scottie.

As the three of them sat down to share the sandwiches, Shane couldn't help wondering how many scenes like this Scottie had walked in on before.

After a sufficient amount of time had

lapsed, Nick informed Shane that he was going to teach her how to swim. Despite all her protests to the contrary, Shane found herself back in the water. By the end of the session, she had managed to master floating.

A phone call interrupted the relaxed gaiety. Nick's opinion was needed on some last-minute script changes. "You want to come along?" he asked her after relaying the message to Shane.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "If I'm to go to that party with you, I'd better see if someone can do something about this mess," she said, holding out one crinkled strand of hair.

"Suit yourself," Nick said. "Personally, I think it's cute." With that, he kissed the top of her head and instructed Scottie to see about getting her home.

Shane watched him leave the room. There was a strange tightness in her chest that she tried to ignore.

Shane sighed and wiggled into the new cocktail dress she had bought that afternoon. The front came down to a provocative V, while all that covered her bare back were two thin straps that crisscrossed, weaving their way down to her trim waist. She had bought it for the party. More than that, she had bought it to wear for Nick. She couldn't stop thinking about him.

She had to get hold of herself. She had always been able to control her emotions before, except for that brief period with Alan. And even then, she had been the one who had filed for the divorce. She couldn't afford to fall in love again. The emotion ruined all the well-placed order in her life and definitely interfered with her goals.

A knock on the door interrupted the pep talk she was giving herself. Disappointment registered on her face as she swung open the door and found Scottie

standing there instead of Nick.

"Boy, you look terrific!" he told her.

Shane smiled, pleased. "Thank you. Couldn't Nick make it?" she asked, glancing up and down the hallway.

"Oh, he's in the car. There are a lot of people in the lobby and Nick thought it'd be better if he didn't come out and cause a commotion," Scottie explained."

"I guess that makes sense," Shane responded. She hadn't thought about how much privacy a celebrity gives up.

She pulled the door shut behind her as Scottie led the way back to the elevator.

Nick waited for her in the back of the black limousine. Scottie closed the door behind her and went up to the driver's seat.

"Hi," Nick said warmly. Even in the dim light she could see the look of absolute appreciation in his eyes. "Very nice," he said huskily, moving closer to her. "I see that this morning's near-drowning appears not to have had a permanent effect on you."

Lord, he made her nervous. "None," she confirmed.

"You look very tense. Want another massage?" he asked.

The last thing in the world she wanted was for him to put his hands on her again. "No!" she said quickly, then added, "thank you," in a more subdued tone. "Besides, I should be working."

"You are working," he assured her. "You're getting to know me better." He slipped an arm about her shoulders.

Shane pursed her lips. "I meant I should be asking you more questions."

"Ah, yes, more questions." Nick sighed. "All right, fire away."

"Are you interested in anyone very special at the moment?" she heard herself asking. Very professional, McCallister. The man's not dumb. He can see right through that one.

But Nick had the good grace to keep a

straight face. "Yes, very special." His warm breath caressed her face, leaving no doubts in her mind as to his meaning.

"Shane, you're going to have to learn how to relax around me," Nick told her as he turned his head and peered out. "I think we've arrived."

The car came to a halt before a pier on Marston Lake, and they got out. Several yards away were canopied party boats with gleaming white lacquered chairs set up on their decks for the guests. On the shore were six tables laden with food. Music provided by a small band floated about the gaily decorated area.

"Nicky, darling!" came a squeal as Nick and Shane went toward the buffet. Shane looked around to see a starlet type in a silver lame dress that looked painted on. She wiggled over to kiss Nick, then flitted on to another important person who caught her eye.

Nick cleared his throat, a trifle amused at the expression on Shane's face. "Always wondered how women could walk in clothes that tight," he said.

"Her type slithers, I expect," Shane commented dryly. Nick's warm laugh encircled her.

His warm laugh was practically all she had of Nick that evening as she watched one woman after another come up to him and fawn. To his credit, she had to admit that although he seemed to like their attention, he appeared unaffected by it all.

The rest of the evening was a haze of faces and bits and pieces of conversations for Shane. She did not find anyone who had a bad word for Nick. Everyone seemed to like him, she thought, as she curled up sleepily next to him in the limousine on their return trip to her hotel. To her surprise, Nick did not ask to come in, but left her at her door with a tender kiss lingering on her lips. She felt somewhat let down as she closed the door behind her.

Sunday turned into an empty, barren

day. There were no calls from Nick. Shane spent it restlessly trying to regroup her thoughts on paper and ran into an incredible case of writer's block.

By Monday morning, some of her spirit was back. She told herself that she had gotten carried away with the aura that hung about Nick Rutledge and had allowed herself to be swept up in the so-called legend. She almost had herself convinced by the time she reached the set, but then she saw him again and her careful facade began to crumble away bit by bit. He stood in the middle of the makeshift set, listening to the director give him last-minute instructions. He looked tired. She sat on a director's chair and wondered if some late-night tryst had taken its toll on him.

He caught her eye and came over to her. "Been keeping late hours?" she asked casually.

He dropped into the folding chair next to hers. "Yesterday was an incredibly long day," he said.

"Oh? Tell me about it. I'm all ears," she said with a slight edge to her voice.

He seemed to catch it as he looked at her, then grinned. "And they're a shade of green."

Shane bristled. "What are you talking about? I'm merely—"

"—jealous," he said, ending her sentence for her.

"You're too full of yourself. What makes you presume—?"

"Chemistry," he told her, again not letting her finish. "I can feel it."

"Will you let me finish a sentence?" she cried.

"Not when I can read your mind."

She drew herself up, utterly frustrated. "If you could read my mind, I think you'd be in for a big shock right about now," she said.

"Can't you take a little teasing?" Nick asked. "As it happens. I had to take a

quick flight out at 7:00 a.m. Seems the studio heads wanted to hold court and I, for one, don't believe in trying to buck their authority."

"From what I hear, that's a refreshing change from the usual star complex," Shane said.

"They pay me to do a job. If I didn't like the job, I wouldn't take it. I see no point in signing a contract and then putting on airs. Speaking of doing my job . . ." Nick said, suddenly getting to his feet. The director, John Bowman, was gesturing for Nick to join him.

When the cast broke for lunch. Shane got up from her chair as Nick walked towards her.

"C'mom, I'll buy you lunch," he offered.

"Last of the big-time spenders," she bantered back, knowing that no one paid for meals on the set during location shooting.

Nick laughed and put his arm about her shoulders as they walked to the makeshift commissary.

The next day was practically the same. Shane came on the set and observed the hectic pace of the everyday work done to create a film. She interviewed several people. The crew became used to having her prowl about, asking all sorts of questions. She found herself angling to be with Nick as much as possible. But his time was heavily taxed, divided as it was, between takes, rehearsals, and conferences.

And then, on Wednesday, a very strange thing happened. After lunch, Nick disappeared. Questioning several people who might have seen him brought her nothing but casual shrugs. No one questioned his absence.

But Shane did.

"Where did you go yesterday?" Shane asked, cornering Nick in his trailer the next morning. The makeup man was putting the finishing strokes on Nick's face,

highlighting his best features.

"I had some business to take care of," he told her vaguely.

"Oh? And that was?" she prodded.

"A secret," he answered in a firm tone of voice.

The makeup man chose that moment to flip off the protective cloth from Nick's neck and make his retreat. Was this "secret" the angle she was searching for? He had been involved in something yesterday that he didn't want to talk about. Shane was going to find out what.

"How's the article going?" Nick asked, getting out of his chair.

"Cataloging a person's virtues makes for very dull reading," she said honestly.

"Am I dull?"

No, he certainly wasn't that, she thought. Dull was the last word she would have used to describe him. Maybe if she tried to capture his sensuality on paper, that would be enough. Maybe—

Her thoughts went no further as they gave way to a font of churning emotions. Nick's fingers were slowly weaving their way about her waist, tilting her body toward his as he lowered his head.

"I'll mess your makeup," she protested. The absurdity of her comment hit her, and she began to giggle.

"First time I ever had a woman laugh in my face," Nick said, releasing her.

Someone else, Shane guessed, would have been offended. But Nick merely looked amused.

"First time I ever had to worry about a man's makeup," she rejoined.

"Oh?" he asked, hugging her to him. The affectionate movement surprised her. "And how many men have there been?"

She looked up into his face, drinking in every wonderful feature. "Far fewer men than there have been women for you," she countered.

"Then you must be very lonely," he said. There was just a touch of seriousness

to his voice.

Just then, a sharp knock on the door broke the mood within the trailer. "Mr. Bowman wants you on the set, Mr. Rutledge," came the polite call.

"My public," he said, kissing his fingertips and pressing them to her lips, "gets in the way on occasion."

With that, he left. Shane's heart pounded in her ears.

"Camping?" Shane cried in disbelief. The Saturday sun was just struggling to illuminate the hotel room as she stood, staring at Nick. "Why in heaven's name would you want to go camping?"

"Because I like it," he said.

"Camping?" she repeated incredulously. "As in dirt and bugs and lumpy rocks?"

"Camping, as in the stars winking brilliantly over you and the earth pillowing your head," he amended. Stoically she made her way toward her closet and began shoving the hangers apart, fishing out a peach blouse and a pair of jeans.

"We're not going to the heart of darkest Africa," Nick said. "Just to Rocky Mountain National Park."

"Do they have bears in this park?" she asked.

"Probably," he replied nonchalantly. Then added, "You'd better get a move on. The pilot's waiting for us."

"Pilot? What are we going to do, parachute in?" Her eyes were wide with horror.

He came up to her then, putting his arms about her waist. "No." He laughed. "Not this time."

Scottie drove them to a small airstrip, where an Apache four-seater airplane stood waiting. Shane cast an apprehensive glance at the plane. "Don't these things crash a lot?"

"No. Once is about enough." He was

obviously struggling to wipe the smile from his lips.

"Very funny," Shane muttered as she resolutely followed him to the plane.

Shane had never been to a national park. Grudgingly, she had to admit that the sight of nature close up was rather breathtaking. Warm autumn colors of gold, orange, and brown greeted her as Nick helped her out of the small plane.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Nick asked, as if reading her mind.

She nodded. The next thing she knew, he was placing a pack on her back, and she had all she could do to keep her balance. The beauty of nature was quickly forgotten.

"Thanks, Jake," Nick said to the pilot, who was already climbing back into his plane. "We'll go it alone from here."

"We will, huh?" Shane muttered, glancing at their surroundings. The area seemed lonely and desolate. Then she sighed, resigned to her fate. "Okay, Daniel Boone, where to now?"

"Down this trail here," Nick said, pointing in a direction where Shane saw no trail at all. "I know a good stream where we can set up camp and catch some fish for dinner."

"Terrific," Shane muttered.

"Spoken like a true trooper." Nick grinned. "Let's go," he urged, and with that, began leading the way.

The pack was beginning to weigh a ton already as the straps dug into her suede jacket. Shane watched both sides of the wooded area apprehensively, waiting for wildlife to spring out at her. A loud rustling noise overhead made Shane jerk her eyes toward its source. But it was only a large bird flapping its wings against the dying leaves of a maple tree. A number of leaves fell down around her, and as Shane pulled her head away, she missed her footing and slid down the incline right in-

to Nick, knocking him down. Shane heard something go "crack" and stared down in horror at her legs.

They were both broken, she just knew it.

"You're not supposed to slide down the hill," Nick told her, getting up first and taking her hand. She made no move to accept it. "What's the matter?"

"My legs," she said, still staring down. "I think I broke them."

Concerned, Nick bent down. "Does this hurt?" he asked, his fingers gently exploring both legs.

"No," she said, her lips thinning. She watched as his fingers came closer to her groin area. "Maybe they're not broken," she said hurriedly, putting her hand on his shoulder and standing up. "But I did hear a cracking noise," she told him.

"A dried branch you stepped on?" he asked as he began to walk again.

"How much farther to this Mecca of yours?" she asked as she caught up to him.

"We're almost there," he said.

"A likely story," she muttered.

"There" turned out to be a tree-lined lake with a huge waterfall at one end as backdrop. Shane imagined that the Garden of Eden must have looked this way in early fall.

"Was it worth it?" Nick asked.

"Yes," she said quietly. "It's worth it."

He looked at her curiously. She realized that from her tone it was obvious that she wasn't just talking about the trek to the stream. And she wasn't. Somewhere along the line, she had unconsciously decided that she should savor what was to be and not weigh the consequences so heavily.

"So what do we do now?" she asked, struggling out of the straps of her backpack.

"Now," he told her, "we set up camp

and start thinking about lunch."

"So where is it?" she asked, bending down to open her knapsack. Nothing but a coffeepot and a frying pan greeted her.

"Out there," Nick told her, pointing toward the stream as he took out several pieces of what looked to Shane like a jigsaw puzzle. After a few twists of the hand and the jigsaw puzzle turned into a fishing pole. "You've got one too," Nick said, nodding toward her knapsack.

Shane looked in again. So that was what those pieces of wood were, she thought, taking them out. It took her a lot longer to put hers together, but finally she joined him, triumphantly showing off her handiwork.

"Very good," he said. "Now cast out your line and sit down next to me."

Casting was another story. The line refused, at first, even to enter the water, getting caught on an overhead branch instead. Nick disentangled her, having the good grace not to laugh out loud.

"Maybe you weren't cut out for this sort of thing," he said sympathetically.

Which was just what she needed to hear. Thus challenged, Shane did not give up until she finally got her hook in the water.

"There," she said smugly, burying the hilt of her fishing rod in the ground the way he did. "Never tell me I can't do anything," she said.

A sensuous smile played on his lips. "You can't make love to me," he said, watching her face.

She hadn't expected him to say such a thing, and after an initial hesitation, she started to laugh. "Oh, no, I'm not falling into that trap."

"Why not?" he said softly. "I have."

His breath caressed her cheek, and somehow she found herself in his arms. Raw passion sprang up as their lips met. They dropped to the ground as one, and Shane pulled him closer to her, glorying in

the weight of his body against hers. His tongue familiarized itself with her tongue, teeth, lips, just as his hands learned the contours of her body. Her jacket had long been discarded in face of the growing noonday heat, and now her blouse was parting from her skin as Nick's sensitive fingers grazed along her breastbone. His hands moved deftly to her back to rid her of her bra. Instantly, her freed nipples hardened against the smooth skin of the palm of his hand.

Fire coursed through her veins as her heart pounded harder, mingling with the beat of Nick's own. Without thinking, she pulled his shirt, wanting him free of it, wanting his hard, warm flesh pressing against hers.

Nick stood up for a moment, flinging the shirt off his body in a fluid motion, and quickly slipping off his boots and jeans. "That better?" he asked.

She had no voice with which to answer, and only nodded. All her senses were filled with him as she raised her hands in supplication. Within a moment, he had her bare back down on the carpet of grass as he covered her chest with his own.

The hot tingle of mingling flesh excited her even more, as did the path of his wandering hand. The zipper of her jeans was sliding down and Shane felt his fingertips coast softly along the waistband of her bikini underwear, pulling the elastic down farther and farther.

"Your boots, milady," Nick teased in a husky voice when her jeans would yield no further. She raised first one leg and then the other, enabling him to pull off her boots and then slip off her jeans and panties.

Nick lowered his head and once more covered her mouth with his own. The assault was a mixture of tender passion and burning desire.

"Oh God, Shane," he murmured, pressing her close, "I've wanted you so

badly."

A frenzy of passion seized them both, and they moved with wild beauty and great urgency. Shane felt as though she were being pulled upward into paradise. Exquisite pleasure burst through her like a towering flower in full bloom. She trembled violently, calling Nick's name. The petals of the flower reached out and covered her then, soothing all her senses as she returned to earth.

The first thing she was aware of was Nick's warm smile. "Hi," he said.

"Hi yourself," she murmured, savoring the feel of his arms and his body against hers. She felt wonderful.

Nick hugged her and chuckled. "I think we caught a fish."

Shane turned her head slightly, seeing that one of the two poles was bent and straining. "Lunch," she acknowledged.

"Could I interest you in some more dessert first?" he asked mischievously.

To answer him, Shane pulled his head down to meet hers, her eager lips parted and waiting.

Lunch had faded into dinner by the time they got around to eating anything. Nick had made a campfire, and the fish sizzled on the open flame.

"Just like in the westerns," she commented, sitting cross-legged on the ground and hungrily eating her share.

Nick sat down beside her. "Used to do this sort of thing all the time. Red Wing and I would come down every chance we'd get and camp around here," he said, a smile on his face.

"Red Wing?" she asked, curious.

"That was his tribal name. He used 'Harry' in school. He was a full-blooded Ute. Taught me everything he knew about the forest, what signs to look for, all the things you hear about in Indian movies. I met him when I was nine. He was my best friend."

"Where is he now?" Shane asked.

"In the Ute burial grounds," Nick said, his voice strangely devoid of emotion.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, reaching out to touch his hand. "What happened to him?"

"He was in my unit in Viet Nam. He wasn't as lucky as I was," Nick said, and from his tone, she could see that the discussion was over.

It began growing dark soon after that, and Shane became more and more jumpy. The night sounds were unnerving to her, and she drew closer and closer to Nick.

"Nervous?" he asked.

She swallowed hard and licked her lips, which were terribly dry. "Nick, about bears—"

"There's one sure way to keep them away," he interrupted. "I know for a fact they never attack two in a sleeping bag."

It was a moment before his teasing words sank in. "Never, huh?"

"Nope."

"Well, don't just sit there," she said, giving him a little push in the direction of his knapsack. "Get your sleeping bag ready."

Soon the fear of intruding bears wasn't even a faint threat to Shane.

"Now I know why you like to go camping so much," Shane said to Nick the next morning as she rolled up his sleeping bag.

He pulled her close to him and nibbled affectionately on her ear. "I will have you know, milady, that you are the very first woman I have ever had out in the wilderness, er, I mean been out camping with."

"Ha! I heard that Freudian slip!"

"Scoff if you like; it's true. Most women don't like to get their nails chipped."

His words made her look down at her own hands. "My nails," she wailed, then

looked up at Nick. A smile crept onto her lips. Her nails were all dirty and broken, but dear heaven, it had been worth it.

Before Shane knew it, it was time to go. She found herself really sorry about leaving this idyllic place.

Scottie met them at the airport. Shane decided to go to her hotel and work on her article as Nick would be busy studying his lines for Monday's scenes

The next day marked the beginning of October. It was also the beginning of one of the biggest storms on record in the region. Sunny skies were not predicted until the weekend.

The director was upset because filming came to a halt but every morning when Shane woke up, she was pleased to see the rain. She spent the whole week at Nick's house and in Nick's bed. They spent almost every minute together except for Wednesday afternoon. Nick said he had a couple of errands to do but would be back in time to have dinner with her.

When Nick returned, Shane felt awkward. Where did he go on Wednesdays? Did he have someone else? What if she was presuming too much? What if he thought that this was a casual fling?

As if reading her mind, Nick said, "I think I have right to know what's bothering you."

"Why?" she asked defensively.

Nick began to play with the shell buttons on her blouse, separating them from their buttonholes one at a time. "Because lady, if you don't realize by now that you're pretty special to me, you're not as perceptive a writer as you've led me to believe." The blouse fell away, hanging on either side of her full breasts like a parted curtain. Slowly, Nick's searching fingers began to skim over the lacy outline of her bra.

"How special?" she asked.

"Special enough to make me want to

make you a part of my life," he told her, uncinching her belt and guiding the zipper of her pants down with the tip of his forefinger.

"That's just it," she tried to tell him, struggling valiantly to keep her wits about her as her body burned. "I don't want to be just a part—"

Nick raised his eyes to her face for a moment. "Does that mean you're turning down my proposal?" he asked seriously.

"Proposal?" she gasped in astonishment.

"Well, I wasn't talking about forming a production company. Have I been misunderstanding what's been happening between us?" he asked, his hand frozen in mid-motion. "Don't you love me?" he asked huskily.

Oh, God, yes, her mind echoed. But the tone she used in replying was hesitant.

"Yes"

"But?" he pressed.

She sighed. "I'm not one to tend the home fires," she told him, wishing desperately that the words would form more clearly.

"I wasn't intending to leave you home," he told her. "I thought I'd take you with me on location." He began to tug at her slacks.

Without thinking, Shane stood up, allowing her slacks to fall to her ankles. Nick pulled her back on his lap and removed the remaining outer clothing.

"To stand around and watch you work?" Shane asked.

"No," Nick said, stroking her leg. "To make love with me until I'm ready to die of exhaustion."

"But . . . I . . . like . . . my career . . ." she protested.

"Fine," he said, his voice thick with desire. "You can go on with it, if that's what makes you happy," he told her, his breath coming in shorter and shorter gasps as he unhooked her bra.

"But that'll separate us," she protested.

"Right now the only thing separating us is a little material," he told her, shifting around and laying her on the bed. Nick stood up, quickly removed his clothes and stretched out next to her on the bed.

"Things'll work out," he promised her, whispering the words against her ear before he bathed it in short, flaming kisses.

Anything Shane might have said in the way of a reply was lost as his mouth covered hers, almost blistering it in its demands. He was drawing away her very soul, pulling it into himself, as passion took over every fiber of her body.

"I love you, Shane," he murmured over and over again, his words heavy with desire.

Rhythmically, the ultimate crescendo building with increasing force, their bodies moved against each other, each leading the other to the promised paradise ahead. The final burst of power left them both breathless, sweetly tired and wrapped in each other's arms.

The sun appeared on Saturday. The weather forecast was for sunny skies all week. Shane found it difficult to slip back into a routine when Monday rolled around. Nick did not have that much free time for her, and she saw him primarily on the set. His evenings were spent learning the next day's lines. So their intimate, shared moments occurred in his trailer, but even then time was precious. Nick was in most of the scenes in the film, and his presence was required on the set virtually all the time.

And then he disappeared again on Wednesday afternoon.

"But where does he go?" Shane asked Scottie.

He was evasive. "Nick just . . . goes, that's all," he told her, looking about, as

parently in search of a direction that would take him away from Shane.

Shane shook her head. "Uh-uh. These disappearances of his are prearranged. Why are the only scenes that don't include him shot on Wednesday afternoons?"

"Coincidence?" Scottie suggested hopefully.

"Scottie, tell me," she implored.

Scottie looked at her, his expression for once devoid of high enthusiasm. She could almost see him arguing with himself.

"He goes to an Indian reservation," Scottie said, his voice lowering slightly.

Why would he be keeping visits to a reservation a secret, unless there was something more than tourism involved?

Aloud, she asked, "Where is this reservation?"

"It's called Cherry Creek Reservation. Don't ask me any more," Scottie said, obviously having second thoughts about it.

"You never said a word," she told him. "Just point me to an available car and a map."

Shane had never seen a real reservation, so she had no idea what to expect. It was a small area, almost like a city project, she thought as she approached it, except that there were a lot more open spaces.

She found a trailer marked "Administration" and knocked. A soft voice told her to come in. Shane stepped inside where a pretty, olive-skinned woman sat behind the desk.

"Hi," Shane said, extending her hand. "I'm Shane McCallister, from *Rendezvous* magazine. Nick Rutledge told me to meet him here, but he forgot to tell me just where. I wonder if you could help me."

"He's right down the hall," the woman said rising. "I'll show you the way to the classroom."

Shane followed the tall young woman down the poorly lit hallway. "Well, here it is," the woman said. They came to a stop before the last door, which she opened for Shane. Quietly, the woman faded back into the hallway.

Shane entered the room quietly. The floor was literally covered with students, all sitting cross-legged on the creaky, unpolished wood. Shane stood stock still near where she had entered. There was no place else to go. Every available seat was taken. No one even looked in her direction or acknowledged her entrance. Only the "teacher" looked surprised. But the look quickly disappeared from Nick's face, and his lecture did not skip a beat.

As Shane listened, she realized that Nick was actually teaching an acting class. This was the last thing she had pictured a popular actor doing in his spare time.

"You amaze me," Shane confessed after the last student had reluctantly left. "I came here fully expecting to find a chink in your armor and I turn up a solid-gold breast-plate instead." She crossed her arms before her as she watched Nick erase the lesson from the board. "Aside from throwing unsuspecting women into pools, I think your only other bad habit is that you snore."

Nick put down the eraser and turned to look at her. "I snore?" he asked in surprise.

She held her thumb and forefinger up, parted slightly. "Just a little."

He shook his head, coming around the desk. "Can't be. No one in my family ever snored. We're just going to have to have you over a few more times to run a controlled test on your observation," he said, moving close and putting his arms around her.

"Aren't you even curious about how I got here?" she asked.

"I figure you twisted Scottie's arm, right?" he said, letting her go.

"I'm sworn to secrecy," she said, solemnly raising her right hand. "Speaking of which, why are you making such a big secret out of this? I think it's wonderful."

"I'm not doing it to be wonderful," he told her flatly. "I'm doing it because I want to contribute something and I don't want people flocking in just to ogle me. I'll meet my fans elsewhere." He shoved his notes in his back pocket and put a guiding hand on Shane's shoulder.

As they were walking toward the car Shane had borrowed, she asked, "What made you start here?"

"After my hitch in the Army was over, I came back here to Red Wing's family," Nick explained. "I wanted to tell them everything I could remember about his last few months. So I stayed for a while. And I began to see what a crying need these people have. I wanted to do something about it. When my big break came, I was in a position to help."

They came to a halt at the car. His fingertips brushed against the hollow of her throat as he tilted her head up toward his. The kiss that followed was powerful, yet very tender.

"Let's go to my place. You can follow in your car," he said, beginning to head toward his own.

But Shane shook her head. "I have to start working on my article."

"Wouldn't you rather work on the real thing instead?" he offered, spreading his hands wide.

"Uh-uh. I can't think around you," she retorted, opening her car door. "I'll see you in the morning." She slid into her seat.

"Suit yourself," he said, and walked away.

She watched his back, sadness filling every part of her.

Shane spent a productive night, revising some of her notes and writing furious-

ly into the wee hours. A smile spread over her face. It was shaping up quite nicely, she told herself.

Feeling extremely satisfied, she laid the article to rest at 2:00 a.m.

At five she rose again, almost as if in a dream. Nick had gotten her used to waking up early. She stretched, feeling the emptiness of the place next to her. Oh, yes, she was in her hotel room, she reminded herself. Nick had certainly gotten her used to quite a bit more than just getting up early.

An hour and a half later found Shane was shivering on the set. She was one of the first persons to arrive. She scanned the area for Nick's familiar form. He was to film the chase sequence this morning, she had discovered. The script girl had allowed her to read the newly written pages over her shoulder.

"Hi."

Just the sound of Nick's voice did wonderful things to her, she thought as she turned to face him. He held aloft a brown bag, then gave it to her.

"Peace offering. For letting me study my lines—for *making* me study my lines," he corrected.

Puzzled, she opened the heavy bag. "Pistachio nuts!" she exclaimed, looking back up. "Thank you."

Shedding his sheepskin jacket and handing it to her, he ordered, "Save me some."

Shane grinned. How like him to be so thoughtful. They had discovered a mutual passion for pistachios. Nick had remembered that—even though his mind was filled with the millions of details of getting a part just right on the screen.

"Hey, they're almost all gone," Nick said as he squatted next to her chair a few hours later.

Shane looked sheepishly down at the bag. "I'll make it up to you," she promis-

ed.

"See that you do," he ordered, slipping his jacket over his shoulders. "I have an idea. You can come to the costume party with me this Saturday."

"Another party? Boy, you actors lead a hard life," Shane said wryly.

"I'll have you know that this one is for a good cause," Nick informed her, pretending indignation. "It's for charity. And you should be thanking me."

"Oh, and why, pray tell?" she bantered.

"Because there're going to be a lot of celebrities attending," Nick told her.

"What are they doing here?" she asked, looking around at the vast countryside.

"Not here," Nick said, gesturing at the terrain, "Aspen. This is the beginning of the skiing season."

"Are we flying there?" Shane asked.

"No, they're all flying down here. It's Gloria's party."

Oh, yes, Gloria, the party giver, Shane recalled. "Does Gloria do anything besides give parties?" Shane asked, munching on another nut.

Nick reached into the almost empty bag and took several for himself. "She backs my pictures."

"Rutledge, are you planning to phone in your performance?" Bowman called. "Get your butt over here!"

Shane waved gaily as Nick walked off again.

On Saturday, Shane surveyed her reflection, a wide smile of approval on her lips. The harem-girl costume she had borrowed from the Wardrobe Department looked as provocative as anything Shane could have fantasized. She fastened her veil, taking care to leave her flowing hair free. Sultry. That was the word, she thought with satisfaction. Salome, eat your heart out!

It was obvious that Nick was eating his

out when he first laid eyes on her. She pretended not to notice as she slid into the backseat of the limousine.

Nick was dressed as a Viking. "Now I know why the Vikings like to loot and pillage strange new lands. You're turning into a real temptress," Nick said. Shane smiled smugly all the way to the party.

She felt all eyes upon them as they entered the huge ballroom. As at the last party, peaceful music floated through the air, thanks to a large orchestra that played off to the side. But there were many more people at this one, and Shane recognized more than a few faces that had graced movie screens across the world.

"This way, Shane," Nick said, taking her arm. "There's someone here I want you to meet." He brought her over to an aging, distinguished-looking Rhett Butler. Next to him stood a very young-looking Scarlett O'Hara.

"Alexander Tate, I'd like you to meet Shane McCallister," Nick said, presenting her. "Shane's with *Rendezvous* magazine."

"Ah, yes," Tate said, a genuine smile touching his mouth. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. "I'm familiar with your work."

"Well, I'll leave you two to get acquainted," Nick said, suddenly leaving her side. "Ginger?" Nick asked, offering his arm to the woman at Tate's side. "How about a quick whirl around the floor?"

And with that, Nick and Ginger disappeared into the crowd, leaving Shane feeling strangely empty. She turned to Tate and forced a smile. "He seems to have run off with your date," she said, her throat unusually dry.

"My daughter went quite willingly, I assure you."

His daughter? Shane looked at the distinguished-looking man in a new light. "So," she said, "you've read some of my

articles. I'm flattered."

"You're also very good," Tate told her.

Shane and Tate sat down together; she did her best to be polite to Tate. She tried not to be too obvious as she kept an eye out for Nick.

"Nick speaks quite highly of you," Tate said.

"Have you known him long?" she asked, wondering just what Tate's connection with Nick was.

"Since before he had his first rippling muscle," Tate told her.

"Then, you were neighbors?" she prodded.

"Once," he replied.

Boy, some interviewer you are, she thought disparagingly. Can't even get full sentences out of Rhett Butler.

"Ginger's worn me out."

Shane looked to her left in surprise as Nick returned with the voluptuous Scarlett still clinging possessively to his arm.

"I give her back to you," Nick said, handing her over to Tate.

"Oh, dear," the silver-haired man said, rising, "that means I have to find someone else to occupy her for a while." He turned toward Shane, who was still seated. "Thank you, Miss McCallister. I had a very pleasant chat. Then, offering his arm to his daughter, he left.

Nick sat down next to Shane, putting his arm about her shoulders. "Have a nice talk?" she asked.

"Yes, I guess you can say that..." Shane's voice trailed off.

Nick laughed. "Alexander's a little eccentric but geniuses are allowed to be."

"Geniuses?" Shane echoed, looking at Nick quizzically. "What does he do?"

"Oh, Alexander's dabbled in a lot of things in his time," Nick said evasively. "Care to eat?"

Shane nodded, and they went in search

of the sumptuous buffet that Nick had assured Shane their hostess was famous for. At the long table Shane found more gourmet foods than she could conceivably hope to sample in one evening.

But the food did not hold her attention for long, as Nick began to introduce her to people she had only seen gracing the front covers of magazines or read about in newspaper articles.

Pins and needles of excitement coursed through Shane's veins later as she leaned against Nick in the dark interior of the limousine. Scottie let them out at the front door and took the car around to the garage. She didn't see him again until the next morning.

"Come, milady," Nick said, scooping Shane into his arms at the foot of the spiral stairway. He carried her into his vast bedroom and closed the door softly behind him. One lone, brass lamp gave light to the darkness.

Shane kicked off her shoes. She watched Nick's face as she took off first one armband and then the other, tossing each to him with a wicked smile on her face.

Her top and her skirt came floating toward him next as she peeled them off one at a time.

Shane heard Nick mutter an anguished groan as she drew nearer. Moonlight illuminated her nude body as Nick reached out for her.

"C'mere, you," he breathed huskily, his voice choked with emotion.

"No," she whispered back. "You're not ready yet." With fingers that were almost trembling, Shane undressed him.

"How may Vikings have you undressed, vixen?" he asked. His voice sounded strained, as if he were fighting for control.

"Just one," she replied. "Take me now," she all but pleaded, entwining her arms around his neck.

The passion that exploded within them

took a long time to quell. Shane sought desperately to lose herself in Nick's arms, feverishly making love to him.

"Hey, what is it?" he asked at one point, his arms cradling her as the length of his body fit against the soft contours of her own. She clung to him, her nails digging into his back, pulling him in closer to her.

"Just love me, Nick," she cried, pulling his head down closer to her, her lips yearning for his. "Just love me."

"I do," he murmured against her mouth, scorching it once more with the intensity of his kiss.

Shane prayed that something would hold back the dawn and let her die within the ecstasy created by the only man she would ever love.

The last week of her assignment passed like water through a sieve, despite the way she tried to cling to each moment. Shane found it hard to face the reality that she knew was waiting for her. Some women would have thought of her as the world's greatest fool, giving up a life with Nick for a career that was only partially formed; a career she still had to work at in order to mold it into what she ultimately wanted. But she knew that in the final analysis, she wouldn't be complete unless she was her own person. And besides, she thought ruefully, Nick had never repeated his proposal, never even brought up the fact that she was supposedly considering his offer of marriage. Most likely he'd regretted his proposal the minute he had made it, she thought with tears in her eyes.

The last-minute details of filming on location took up almost all of Nick's free time, so Shane was left to her own devices, and threw herself into her work. The article that emerged from her pen was the finest she had ever written. A labor of love, she thought with a sad smile as she sat in her lonely hotel room, trying hard

together.

Her time alone with Nick was limited to driving to and from the reservation because of the demands of the shooting schedule. Still, she consoled herself, they'd spend her last night together.

Or so she thought.

"A dinner party?" she repeated, trying to hide her dismay as he presented the idea to her that last afternoon on the set as they were walking back to his trailer. Her plan to spend an intimate evening in his arms crumbled.

"Who's going to be there?" she asked, pretending to be interested.

"Alexander Tate."

Nick was standing in front of his trailer, and she almost walked into him, oblivious to the fact that he'd halted. He put his hands on her shoulders to steady her.

"Hey, whoa, there. What are you so preoccupied with?" he asked, studying her face.

She looked away. "Just the end of my article," she lied. And the end of us, she tacked on silently.

"Work on that this afternoon. I'll have Scottie pick you up at seven. Don't be late," he said with a wink.

"I never am," she said, attempting to sound carefree.

"Amazing woman." Nick laughed, blowing her a kiss.

She pretended to catch it, then turned and walked away, her heart aching.

Nick's chef had outdone himself, Shane thought as she sat in the spacious formal dining room that evening. But she discovered that her appetite had deserted her. She wasn't the least bit tempted by the delicate dishes that were served. Shane was placed next to Tate.

"Nick tells me that you'll be returning to New York tomorrow," Tate said.

"Yes," Shane replied dully.

"Tell me, would you consider making a

career move at this time in your life?" Tate asked.

"If a good offer came," Shane said honestly. "I'd be more than willing to consider it."

"Would you consider a position as a senior writer on *In-depth* magazine a good offer?"

"*In-depth* magazine?" she repeated dumbly, her mouth forming an unspoken "Oh" as the truth rushed in on her. "You're *that* Alexander Tate? The owner of *In-depth* magazine?"

"Among other things," he told her. "How about it?" he prodded. "I realize that it would mean moving from New York. I like my writers to stay close to the home office," he explained. "And the home office is in Los Angeles."

He needn't have told her that. She knew all about *In-depth* magazine. It was an even classier publication than *Rendezvous*, and the position Tate mentioned was one she would have given her eyeteeth for—if she had come by it honestly.

Shane eyed Nick suspiciously, but he merely smiled at her.

"I would consider an opportunity to work on the staff of *In-depth* a godsend," Shane said. "The move from New York would be a small price to pay for the privilege of being part of the staff of your magazine. But—"

Tate didn't seem to hear the last word. "Fine. It's all settled, then. Here's my card," he told her, fishing it out of his breast pocket and handing it to her. "Give me a call, and in private we'll discuss salary, benefits, that sort of thing."

Shane stared at him, stunned. It was too good to be true, she thought. Things like this just didn't happen, except in the movies. The movies. Yes, it did smack of romanticism. It smacked of Nick.

She said nothing more on the subject for the remainder of the evening, which

was short. Once Tate's "mission" was accomplished, he did not stay on very long. He said something about having an early flight to catch, and he thanked Nick for a wonderful time. And for the ticket.

"Ticket?" Shane questioned as they returned from seeing their guest off in the front drive.

"I sent him an airplane ticket."

"To come here," Shane said, filling in the rest of his statement.

"To come here," he repeated.

"And offer me a job." She felt angry tears that she only half understood forming in her eyes.

"I was hoping. Hey, what's the matter?" he asked.

Shane shut her eyes. How could she make this come out right? "Don't you see, Nick? It doesn't mean anything if you get me the job. I have to get it. I don't believe in favoritism. I've always hated it," she said impatiently.

Nick took her hand and led her into the den and shut the door "Now, you listen to me before you get on that high horse of yours. All I did was direct Alex's attention to you."

"You call sending a man an airplane ticket directing his attention?" she asked incredulously.

"I call that being polite," he said. "First I had Scottie go to the local library and get back issues of *Rendezvous* and make copies of your articles. Then I gave Alex a call, telling him about you and offering to forward the articles. I sent the ticket because I didn't want to inconvenience the man any further. It was his choice to come, his choice to offer you the job. Your merit got him to do that, not any magical powers of mine!"

"Why did you do all that?" she asked.

"Because, milady, I'm a firm believer that husbands and wives should try to stay on the same side of the continent

whenever possible. It makes the trip to the bedroom that much shorter," he told her, taking her into his arms.

"Then, you still want to marry me?" she asked, not able to believe it. Why her?

"Still? Lady. I'd move heaven and earth to have you," he said, his hold on her tightening as he kissed her cheek.

"Why?" she asked, her mind beginning to reel.

"Why?" He chuckled, pulling her down on his lap as he sank into the comfortable cushions of the sofa that faced the fireplace. "Because," he said, slowly beginning to unzip the back of her dress, "you're warm, vibrant, sensitive, intelligent, and you love me."

She felt the shoulders of the dress slip down. "Millions of women love you."

"Millions of women love the image of Nick Rutledge. You've proven you love the man. You've proven that you can stand being pulled out of bed at ridiculous hours, camp out with only a few whimpers, and even put up with near-drowning without immediately thinking of either suing me or blackmailing me." He nibbled on the soft outline of her breasts left uncovered by the top of her bra. Her dress now rested about her waist.

Darts of excitement danced through her as she cradled his head, savoring the feel of his hair against her soft skin.

"So will you say yes already?" Nick asked, looking up at her.

"Yes already," Shane murmured, her heart singing.

"Good," Nick said, sliding her off his lap and onto the sofa. He slipped the dress the rest of the way down, discarding it on the floor. She lay before him, ready.

"I love you, Nick," Shane whispered hoarsely.

"I sure in hell hope so," Nick said. "Because I love you with all my heart, and soul, and body." ♥

Anywhere and Always

Moody and brilliant, high-tech inventor Justin Fuller comes to the Henley's lakefront cabin on an enforced vacation. Sullen at first, he learns to appreciate certain country comforts. . . such as Lydie Henley's lessons in relaxation.

LEE WILLIAMS

The Travers City airport was a half block of building, shimmering now in the August heat, in front of a tarmac the size of a football field.

Lydie Henley walked through the terminal doors and paused to look around. With her hands on the hips of her blue jeans, she stretched her back and peered about the cool interior. Not exactly a bustling axis of travel and commerce, this, she mused wryly, automatically comparing the all-

but-deserted airport to the seething hysteria of LaGuardia in New York. Now, where was this Mr. Fuller she was supposed to meet?

There was a man seated near the phone booth, and Lydie stared at him, puzzled, feeling a little jolt of indefinable excitement as she took in his features. *Handsome* was too tame a word to describe him. He looked like. . . a civilized Pan, with a strong chin, an aquiline nose, and disheveled

From ANYWHERE AND ALWAYS by Lee Williams. Copyright © 1986 by Lee Williams. Published by permission of The Berkley Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

black hair.

Justin Fuller. She knew it had to be he. His black penny loafers, brown corduroys, and simple but well-tailored powder-blue shirt suggested city slicker, all the way.

On closer inspection, she could see some character in that handsome face. His skin shone with vitality, but had yet to see the sun this summer, and a little network of lines around his eyes indicated that he was far from carefree.

She knew instinctively that a battery of women before her had felt the same impulse—to brush the lock of hair off his forehead.

Lydie moved forward, saying "Mr. Fuller?"

He straightened. "Yes?"

"I'm your taxi," she said.

"You?" An eyebrow rose.

Lydie took a step back, apprehensive suddenly. Anyone with eyes that sensual and a build that good should have an ego big as Lake Michigan.

For a moment his dark eyes appraised her. She steeled herself for the come-on line that seemed imminent. But he merely nodded and said, "Every rental car in town's been taken by a Shriner." He picked up his suitcase, along with something that obviously contained a computer, and headed for the door, pushing it open for Lydie. "So where's the cab?"

He was squinting in the sunlight. Lydie gazed at him evenly. "You're looking at it," she informed him.

Justin regarded her old Volvo. "That's a cab?"

"It'll get you there," she said sharply, irritated now at what bordered on rudeness in his manner. "Look, if you'd rather walk, I'm sure we can arrange—"

Justin turned to face her, and his scowl slowly gave way to a sheepish expression she found oddly endearing. "Sorry," he said gruffly. "It's been a long week.

Your cab is quite lovely. You're lovely, too," he added, a mischievous twinkle glimmering in his eyes. "What's *your* name?"

"Lydie Henley," she told him warily.

"Lovely name," he said extending his hand. She put out her own, then quickly disengaged it and walked swiftly around the car. Justin Fuller put his luggage into the back and got into the front seat next to her, and as she pulled away from the curb, he said, "I'm headed for Birchwood. Do you know the town?"

"I know it all right," she said dryly. "In fact, you're staying at my place—I mean, my parents' place," she corrected quickly. "The Henleys' cabin."

"You're them? I mean—" He stopped himself. "Lydie Henley. Right. What a coincidence." Though her eyes were on the road, she could feel his gaze exploring her features. "Or is it fate?" he added.

"Not really," she said. I drive a cab here a few days a week, and there's only two of them in Traverse City, one airport, and one flight on Sunday. So . . ."

"I see," Justin murmured. "So here I am: nowhere. And Birchwood—that's one gas station and one general store and one restaurant, I guess. Is there more than one good-looking cabdriver? Or do you have that particular slot sewn up?"

Lydie shot him a withering glance. She didn't like his attitude or his backhanded compliments. "You're not particularly impressed with northern Michigan so far, I see," she said stiffly. "What brings you out here?"

Justin pursed his lips and gazed moodily through the windshield. "I was forced into it by a well-meaning friend," he said ruefully, and then fell silent.

"Oh," she said, disconcerted by his mysteriousness. As the silence continued, her feelings of defensiveness about the lake peninsula continued to simmer. "Perhaps you'll be lucky, then," she

found herself saying, "and your stay will be very short."

He gave her a look that instantly communicated he was taken aback by her rudeness. Lydie felt a flush of embarrassment. But his gaze lingered on her face, seeming to assess the softness of her skin, and she felt the flush suffuse her body. Lydie forced her eyes to mind the road:

"I'm sorry," he said at length. "This looks like a really wonderful piece of country, really...but to tell you the truth, I would think anybody with half a brain would go crazy here within a week."

Lydie saw red. It didn't matter that a small voice in her head was reminding her that those had been her exact sentiments when she'd first returned, not so long ago.

"Look, Mr. Fuller," she said icily. "You may be used to sophistication and nonstop excitement in whatever city you come from, but I can assure you that Birchwood, or any other small town in these parts, doesn't lack for intelligence, or stimulation, or entertainment."

They were silent the rest of the way. As Lydie pulled up outside the lake cabin and shut off the motor, she said, "This is it," ready now to do battle.

"This is it?" he said, disbelief in his eyes.

To Lydie, the lakeside cabin and the woods around it were a few acres of country paradise. The cabin was surrounded by white pines, some birch, and some gnarled apple trees on the edges of the property. There was a sense of real seclusion and privacy.

But Justin Fuller didn't seem a good candidate for quiet and relaxation. He'd climbed out of the car and was pacing around the dirt driveway.

"It does have electricity?"

Lydie considered saying he'd need candles—and sticks to rub together to make fire—but she controlled herself.

"Yes, it does," she assured him, starting up the path. "And hot and cold running water, with strong water pressure, and a couple of heaters, and a telephone."

She paused at the top step of the cabin, getting the key out of her pocket, a sudden jolt of panic taking hold. Good grief—she'd forgotten completely what a mess still lay within.

"We thought you were coming tomorrow," she said. "I'm actually living with my family, but I've also been using the cabin, and I haven't had a chance to really...clean up."

Justin, poised on the step behind her, gave a shrug. "That's all right," he said. "I guess I should've phoned before I left home instead of from the airport. But you see, I nearly didn't make it up here at all, and at the last minute..."

His voice trailed off as he stepped into the cabin behind her. Lydie, without even pausing in her stride, made a beeline for the pine dresser, in the bedroom and began to clean up the mess she'd left.

"You were saying?" Keep him talking. Maybe that way he wouldn't notice the utter disarray.

"Well, I had made other plans," he went on, putting his suitcase down by the table in the main room. "Then Handleman intercepted me and practically forklifted me into an airplane."

"Handleman?" Her suitcase seemed to have shrunk since her arrival—either that, or she'd somehow acquired twice as many clothes since.

"Luke Handleman." Justin paused at the door watching her. "He's my...well, he calls himself my keeper."

So Justin Fuller needed a keeper? Somehow not surprising, even though she couldn't imagine what he needed to be kept from doing.

He looked away from her to study the windows that faced the lake. "It's pretty," he allowed, surveying the

greenery that beckoned beyond the white curtains. "What happens here in the winter?"

"Nothing," she told him wryly. "The lakes freeze over and the people make like bears."

"You, too?"

Disbelief was evident in his voice. "Well, no," Lydie allowed, wondering what it was about *her* appearance in particular that suggested she wasn't the hibernating type. "I mean, I haven't been here in the winter for years. But when I lived here before—"

"Where have you been?"

"East," she said. Two could play at being cagey.

"Manhattan?"

She nodded. "Seven years in the big city."

"So you're visiting your folks for the summer?"

"That's right." It was a white lie, but it would do. She didn't see any need to share her personal problems with Justin Fuller. "And where are you... coming from?" she asked, still interested in trying to combat his inquisitiveness with some of her own.

"West," he said. And clammed up. Abruptly, he turned away, walked into the living room, and bent down, to remove a power cord from his computer case.

All right, be that way, she fumed. Then she steadied herself. Just because she was naturally gregarious, used to getting to know people quickly and happy to have them know her, didn't mean he had to be. And why should she care?

He was searching for an outlet now. Lydie, watching him from the bedroom was taken with a peculiar thought. Was Justin Fuller possibly... shy? He did seem at a loss for words. She stole another glance at him, and he met her eyes. Then he smiled, inexplicably upping her pulse

rate, and Lydie decided she'd figured him wrong. No one with magic eyes and a grin that sexy could be bashful.

Now Lydie was the one to turn away. Her eyes roved over the room. What else needed collecting? Good Lord. Makeup, sketchpads, mail—the bed. She would put fresh sheets on.

She heard a muttered curse behind her and spun around.

"You don't have any three-prong outlets" he said darkly. "When was this cabin built, anyway?"

"Sixty years ago. Prior to three-prongs, I guess," she said dryly. "Maybe you'd rather move into a motel."

Justin met her challenging thrust of chin with a sudden flash of humor in his eyes. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Lydie shrugged. "You're the one being inconvenienced."

"Well, it's just that my computer needs a certain kind of socket... but there must be a decent hardware store in town where I can get an adapter."

Lydie said nothing for a moment, enjoying the look of anxious apprehension that flickered across his features. "Yes, there's a good one," she assured him. "But aren't you on vacation?"

His smile faded. "Exile is more like it," he muttered. "Hmm. I think I brought a battery pack along..."

Lydie ripped the sheets off the bed with a little more force than necessary. Had *she* been like that when she'd first returned? All wired up and impatient? No wonder people had given her a wide berth.

She got clean sheets from the cupboard, and was unfolding the top one when Justin appeared in the doorway.

"Are you in your blue period?"

It took her a moment, but then she saw the smudge of aquamarine around his thumb tip and forefinger. Oh, damn—that experiment with oil-base paint she'd worked on in the morning hadn't dried

yet. The little canvas was propped up by the kitchen sink, along with her brushes and the tubes.

"Not really," she said. "I mean, it's not a blue period so to speak." He was looking at her with undisguised curiosity, and she fumbled for an explanation, wondered why she felt she needed to explain herself, and gave up. "I've been dabbling with oils lately—"

"Let me give you a hand," he said, walking toward the bed.

"No, that's okay. I'll be out of your way in two minutes."

Too late. He'd already grabbed the other corner of the top sheet. Lydie stepped back, focusing her attention on spreading the sheet out. She could feel his glance sweep over her features again.

"So you're a painter?"

"No." The answer was out of her mouth with automatic, reflexive vehemence.

"But you're excellent."

Whether he realized it or not, Justin was entering an extremely sensitive area—an invisible little minefield with Keep Out signs posted at all borders. "Not really," she demurred.

"Yes, really," he insisted, holding her gaze. "Why the false modesty?"

"It's not modesty," she said through tightened lips. What did he know about art, anyway?

"Your color sense is extraordinary," he said, tucking in his corner. "And the foreground-background relationship you've got going there is unusually complex. Are you familiar with Rick Klauber's work?"

Lydie looked up at him, startled. Klauber, not well known by the public at large, more an "artist's artist," had been a major influence on her painting ... when she had been painting in earnest, years ago. "I know it well," she allowed. "How do you—"

"I bought one of his smaller canvases in New York, the last time I was in town," said Justin. "Have you had exhibits there?"

One of the imaginary mines exploded. She could feel the detonation in her stomach. Lydie turned from the bed as her face fell. She rummaged in the cupboard for Grandmother's old quilt. "Are you kidding? Getting into a gallery in Manhattan with my stuff is like trying to climb Mount Everest in sneakers."

"You mean you've given up," he said quietly.

"No, I just branched out," she said, dangerously calm.

"Into what?" Eyes never leaving her face, he took an edge of the quilt in hand.

"Graphics. I've been working as an art director. At *Eighteen* magazine."

"Really? That's a shame."

There was something accusatory in his voice that was very irritating. She was allowed to be judgmental, hard on herself, sure—but who was he? "Some of us like to eat, you know," she said acidly.

"But how can you waste your talents?" he asked.

Lydie stared at him, unable to keep down the outrage that was mingling with other pent-up feelings. "Look, Mr. Fuller—"

"Hold still," he murmured, stepping close to her.

"What?"

As she glared at him, uncomprehending, his fingers brushed her hair. Startled, she stared at him, then looked down to see the furry strip of green on his forefinger.

Lydie bent forward, her anger arrested as she looked at the beautiful, tiny thing. The caterpillar was all fuzzy stripes and wiggles, turning about on Justin's finger in confusion.

"Didn't mean to disturb you," Justin murmured, seeming to address the agitat-

ed creature. But Lydie sensed the apology hovering behind those playful words. She couldn't keep a smile from tugging at her own mouth.

When she looked up, his eyes seemed perilously close, their dark velvet depths glimmering with gold flecks of inviting warmth. She felt a little tremor go through her, and she parted her lips, about to say something, though she didn't know what.

But then, inexplicably, Justin's lips were swooping down to claim hers. Her breath caught in her throat at the shock of warm, soft skin against hers.

She was suddenly engulfed by confusing sensations—a liquid warmth spreading like heated honey from her mouth to the rest of her now-trembling body; a clean, musky male scent filling her nostrils; a rising thunder in her chest that she dimly realized was her pounding heart.

Her eyelashes had fluttered closed for no good reason she could think of, and that was the problem—she couldn't think, period. All she could do was savor the unexpected sweetness of his kiss.

Madness, whispered a little voice. Yes, she answered silently, feeling his hand gently cup her chin, his fingers finding the beating pulse beneath the tingling skin of her neck. But it's certainly an interesting kind of insanity, isn't it?

A sound—half inarticulate murmur, half moan—caught in her throat, and then a beeping sounded somewhere near her ear. The fingers that had been playing with the soft tendrils of her hair paused suddenly.

"I'm sorry," Justin murmured.

Sorry for kissing her? Or sorry for stopping? Lydie cleared her throat. She tried to find her voice, which had disappeared. Justin's fingers brushed her cheek as he pulled away, the beeping sound piercing the silence again.

"Have to make a phone call," he muttered, straightening. Lydie felt sanity seeping back into her consciousness, and with it acute embarrassment. What in the world had gotten into her?

A blush suffused her cheeks as she silently answered her own question. *He*—that strange irksome hunk of dangerously alluring masculinity who was backing out of the bedroom now, a peculiarly bedfuddled expression on his face. Was it her imagination, or was he as taken aback as she was by this sudden turn of events?

Not highly likely. A man who generated erotic wattage like that had to be an experienced and manipulative seducer. At the moment, however, he was bumping into the doorframe, then turning around, disoriented, as the beeper on his wristwatch sounded off again. Lydie had to admit he didn't particularly resemble a practiced playboy.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I didn't mean to... Excuse me." And he vanished through the doorway.

A minute ago she'd been venting her spleen defensively at an insufferably opinionated city slicker who'd barged into her life uninvited. And then... Lydie shook her head. Maybe she wasn't herself yet after all. How else to account for her willing surrender to that—Who was he, for God's sake?

She could hear Justin's voice in the other room. After quickly straightening out the quilt, she made a hasty survey of the bedroom area. Then, gathering up whatever she could that belonged to her, she hurried through the door.

"Five million?" Justin was saying. He was pacing a circle with a four-foot radius, the phone cord already a helpless tangle, and he appeared to have forgotten her completely. Lydie shook her head, wondering if she had dreamed that kiss. But no, her heart was still racing. She'd

better pack up her paints. . .

"You know they could do it for less." He sounded disgruntled. "Look, redesign the capacitors in the switchboard. Call Tom at RCV. . ."

Minutes later, with tubes of paint jammed in a paper bag with her brushes and thinner, Lydie took a hasty look around. Well, she had the bulk of it. If she had to come back, she'd—well, whatever. At the moment, all she could think about was leaving, fast.

She strode to the door, managed to get it open with all hands full, and cleared her throat. Justin ignored her. "Ridiculous," he was saying. "If I was there, he'd never—" He seemed about to pace a ring into the pinewood floor. "Well, if I wasn't stuck in this godforsaken Hicksville—"

Without a word, she exited the cabin, letting the screen door slam, and headed for the car. She was turning on the motor, when the cabin door opened again.

"Lydie?" Justin Fuller peered out. "I'm sorry I—hey, what are you doing?"

Lydie shifted gears and pulled down the driveway in a little shower of dirt and gravel. She could hear him calling her name again, but she didn't glance in the rearview mirror.

At the White Finch at twenty to midnight only a few of the regulars were still drinking. The wooden fans whirled slowly overhead and the jukebox was silent.

Lydie absently rubbed at the small of her back where a dull ache from five hours' work had taken up residence. In another twenty minutes, the White Finch would be closing up, and she could head home.

She caught sight of herself in the mirror over the bar. Her sunburned skin didn't betray any circles beneath the clear blue eyes—circles that could have been there, considering her insomnia last night.

Sleepless nights were supposed to be a thing of the past. Yet another thing she should have left behind when she left the city: that job—that man. But lately they'd returned, and she wasn't sure why. Well, at least she didn't have to worry about insomnia tonight.

Wiping beads of perspiration from her brow, she poured herself a glass of ice water, then looked up in surprise as the tavern door opened.

Justin Fuller? At the White Finch?

Her surprise turned to dismay as he walked slowly up to the bar, his face registering bewilderment. Then he frowned. "I know Birchwood's a small town, but . . . Are you the mayor, too? The chief of police?"

Lydie sighed. "I work here once a week."

"When you're not driving a cab."

"Among other things."

"Such as?"

Lydie shrugged. "You just missed last call. But I'll bend the rules as a friendly gesture."

"Last call?" Justin looked up at the clock. "Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack," she said dryly. "It's Sunday night—and you're in the middle of Hicksville, remember?"

Justin gave a rueful chuckle. "Look, I didn't mean to offend you regarding this place. I'm having a little difficulty. . . adjusting, that's all."

His eyes glowed with a warmth that was hard to resist. Resist! she reminded herself, and looked away into the space over his shoulder. "No problem," she said. "What are you drinking?"

"Actually, I was hoping for a bite to eat."

"At a quarter to midnight?" She shook her head. "I'm afraid the kitchen's closed."

"Really?" He frowned. "Well, is there any place around here where I could get

dinner?"

"Dinner?" she echoed.

"I was on the phone for a while. And then I had some work. You did leave a yogurt in the refrigerator, but I was hoping for something more substantial."

Lydie stared at him, feeling a sudden jolt of remorse. "Oh, dear," she muttered. "And I left you without a . . . How did you get here, anyway?"

"I walked," he said.

It was a good four miles from the cabin to town. "Walked," she repeated weakly.

"It was pleasant, actually. Cleared my head out. I did start out in the wrong direction, but some kids on motorcycles set me straight. Friendly people up here."

Lydie nodded dumbly. "Well, they should have told you about the grocery store in Hobbs," she said. "It's not as far from where you—"

"Oh, no," he said. "I was thinking I might be able to look you up here in Birchwood. I was worried about you."

"You were worried . . . about me?"

"Well, the way you ran out before . . ."

Lydie felt a little tug within her at the glimmer of concern she saw in his eyes. "I shouldn't have . . . kissed you like that," he said softly. "I know it was crazy. I don't know what came over me. I was looking at your lips, and they just looked so infinitely . . . kissable." He shook his head. "I don't blame you for being upset."

"Oh, I . . . no," she murmured.

"And I'm sorry I got caught up in that phone call," he said quietly. "It was something I had to take care of that should've taken only a minute. But it did end up taking longer."

"No big deal," she said. "Really, I'm sorry I left you high and dry. I wasn't thinking." For a moment, she had a vivid memory of just what had caused her to lose all vestiges of rational thought.

"And, of course, I owed you the fare."

he added. "For the cab ride."

"Oh!" She looked at him, feeling more and more foolish. "I figured I'd get it from you . . . later. You must be starved," she said quickly. "Let me see what I can—"

"Don't trouble yourself."

"Nonsense," she said. "I'll just go check inside."

But the cook had already left for the night. Lydie rummaged around in the kitchen. The simplest, fastest thing she could throw together was a cheese omelet, and she was feeling so contrite for having made the man walk four miles to find a meal, she was happy to cook it.

Justin hovered in the kitchen doorway as she began beating the eggs. "So you're a cabdriver, a bartender, a painter, and a cook. Anything else?"

"That's the basic drift," she said, chopping an onion. "And what about you? If you don't mind my asking."

Justin shrugged. "Well, I teach a little here and there, I run a small computer company, and . . . I make things up."

"Pardon?"

"I'm an inventor," Justin said in a tone so offhand he might as well have admitted to a talent for window washing.

Lydie looked up. "Really? That's fantastic. What have you invented?"

"Probably nothing you've ever heard of," he said.

"Try me," she said. "What's the last thing you invented?"

"The Juno 3000," he said. "It's actually a portable version of the Kurtz 200."

"Which is?"

"A reading machine for the blind."

"You're kidding." She slipped a spatula around the edges of the omelet. "How does it work?"

"Technology's on the complicated side," he said. "But what you do is put a book on the screen, and the computer reads the page and translates it into

spoken words. You listen through headphones."

"Really?" She looked at him with renewed respect. "You came up with that?"

Justin shrugged, looking embarrassed. "I just have the patent on the portable version," he said. "It's really no big deal."

She flipped the skillet's contents onto a nearby plate, and Justin followed her back to the bar. She set a place for him, poured him a beer, and went down to the other end to gently but firmly begin the White Finch regulars' evening exodus.

"This is something" Justin said when she returned to where he was sitting. "I feel...okay."

Lydie couldn't help smiling at the sense of honest wonder she heard in his voice. "You mean that you've survived my cooking?"

"No, no," he said. "It's just that I have this problem..."

"Yes?"

"I don't know how to relax."

"Really?"

"Truly," he said, his brow furrowed. "That's why Handleman set this thing up. I'm supposed to give it a try."

"You mean relaxing?"

Justin nodded. "He thinks I'm overworked and overextended, a candidate for burnout. But you know, I've had an inkling. I was thinking about what a beautiful night this is."

"Yes, it is," she said quietly.

"And for a moment there, I felt it."

Lydie smiled. "It?"

"A good feeling. Like being emptied out and filled up at the same time. Tired but still...energized. And I think it has something to do with...you," he continued.

Lydie swallowed. "Me?"

"Yes," he mused. "You emanate a relaxed sort of energy..."

Well, maybe I used to, before you started looking at me with those hazel eyes of yours. "You think so?" she asked.

Justin nodded. "Maybe you could help me out."

"Help you out?"

"Yes, maybe you could show me how to get my mind off my work."

Oh, sure, Lydie thought. Oh, yeah. That was just what she wanted to do—that, or maybe throw herself over Niagara Falls in a barrel. Whichever came first.

Justin wasn't answering. Odd. When they'd made this date the night before, he'd assured her he'd be in all morning. Far to the screen, Lydie thought she could hear an unfamiliar rhythmic clicking from within. She opened the unlatched door and took a tentative step inside. Peering into the dim recesses of the cabin, Lydie realized that Justin was practically right in front of her, hunched over a computer screen, unshaven, and his clothes were the ones he'd worn yesterday. They looked as though they'd been slept in.

For a moment, she considered letting herself out quietly and returning home. What business had she disturbing the genius at work? But then she remembered, with vivid clarity, the fervent request he'd made when she dropped him off last night.

"Force me," he'd said, his eyes glowing with sincerity. "If I'm left to my own devices, I won't even see the light of day. If I'm not ready to leave when you get here, drag me out regardless, okay?"

How could any woman resist such an earnest plea? He'd taken her up on her idle suggestion of a rowboat trip on the lake as if it were his ticket to mental health.

"If this is your idea of rest and relaxation, you're a hopeless case," Lydie said as she systematically lifted the window

shades, and only then did Justin straighten up, blinking with confusion. "It's noon, by the way. Been to bed yet?"

"Briefly," he muttered, with a sheepish look.

"You've got two minutes," she said. "Boat's leaving. I'll wait for you outside. You'll want to change. . ."

"Change? Oh, right. Just give me a minute."

At the dock they stowed the fishing poles in the bottom of the boat and climbed in. As they pushed off and got under way, a cool breeze ruffled the surface of the water. "We're headed for that cove behind you," Lydie said, pointing.

Justin had manned the oars. He nodded, then leaned into his rowing, favoring the left side. Lydie tore her eyes from the muscles rippling in his powerful forearms and scanned the shoreline. There were no other boats in the immediate area.

"It's nice out here." His voice, tinged with surprise, broke the silence. Lydie saw his expression of grudging admiration, and she couldn't suppress a smile. "When are you going back?" he asked.

She stared at him, momentarily confused. "Where?"

"East," he said.

"Well, I'm. . ." She paused, considered evasion, and then decided there was really no reason to avoid the truth. "I don't know," she said, meeting his inquisitive look straight on. "My plans are a little vague."

"What about your job at that magazine?"

"I quit," she admitted.

"Good for you."

This hearty endorsement of an act that most of her friends found self-destructive in the extreme would have been unexpected coming from anyone else.

"Easy for you to say," she muttered. "but it's left me in limbo."

"Limbo isn't the worst place to be."

said Justin. "I've done some creative thinking there, myself."

"But you're probably paid for it," she said ruefully. "I'm not."

Justin shrugged. "I've had my share of peanut-butter-and-jelly diets," he said. "While I was trying to figure out what step to take next. Sometimes being up against it all is just the thing to spur you into action—to take risks you wouldn't take if you were feeling too comfortable."

"I wasn't comfortable at all," she mused, skimming the surface of the water with her fingers.

"You mean, making good money and doing meaningless work?"

"Yes." She met his gaze directly, feeling a surge of pride that didn't have the usual defensiveness coloring it. "I began to feel that anybody could be doing what I was doing, designing colorful layouts for the latest fashion tips. There wasn't any of *me* in it. And even though Martin kept pushing me to—"

She stopped abruptly. She hadn't intended to mention Martin or *that* whole mess. But Justin's eyes were glimmering with curiosity and something she imagined might be sympathy. "Your editor?" he prompted.

Lydie nodded. "Martin got me my job at the magazine. He trained me and . . . brought me up there, so to speak."

Justin's eyes had narrowed slightly. "Had he seen your other work? Your painting?"

"Oh, one or two things. But when I met Martin, I was already trying to find commercial work. He liked my portfolio, and one thing led to another. . ."

"Such as?"

"He hired me as a free-lancer at first," she said evenly. "And pretty soon I became a full-time staffer."

"You were in love with him?"

Startled, she stared at him, the water

splashing up from her suddenly clenched hand. Was she that transparent or was he that quick? "We were going out," she admitted.

"So he wooed you away from your first love."

"My... you mean the paintings?" She laughed, but it was a forced sound that came out wrong. "No, I don't blame Martin. I'd already gotten the picture, pretty much. My art wasn't going to earn me a living in New York. So, when he gave me a chance..." She shrugged. "Look, I even enjoyed it at first."

Justin said nothing, his arms moving back and forth with easy, even strokes. "I know what it must sound like," she said. "But I didn't get involved with Martin until long after I was working for him. I never would have—"

"Of course not, Lydie." It sounded like a reproach. "Don't be silly. I can't imagine you as the immoral, do-anything-to-reach-the-top type. I'll bet you fought it every step of the way."

Lydie laughed. This time her mirth was real, erupting spontaneously. "How long have you known me?" she teased. "Two days, or several years?"

Justin shrugged. His grin lit up his features.

"Yes, I fought it," she said, remembering. "And then I got in too deep... and got out."

"Say no more," Justin murmured, his eyes showing concern. Suddenly he looked down, startled. Lydie heard the oar hit bottom just as he felt it. They were already too close to shore.

"Sorry," she said. "I haven't been a good navigator. See if you can steer us out a bit. Then we'll stop and bait our hooks."

Justin maneuvered accordingly, and before long the dripping oars were inside, the boat swaying in the light breeze. With bunched-up towels as pillows, they faced

each other in the gently rocking boat, lines cast out on either side.

"Aren't we supposed to be on the alert?"

Lydie shook her head. "You'll feel it if you get a bite. Then just reel in. But it usually takes a while."

"Amazing," Justin muttered. "It seems like all this rigamarole and gear are just an excuse to lie in the sun."

Lydie smiled. "In a way, they are. Think you can handle it?"

"I'll do my best," he mused. "What was he like?"

"He?" Justin's habit of changing subjects almost in midsentence was a little disconcerting. "You mean Martin? Well, he was like you in one way."

"Which?"

"He was a workaholic," she said ruefully. "The man was married to his magazine."

"What did that make you? His mistress?"

She shot him a withering look, but couldn't deny that the metaphor was all too apt. "Things worked out fine once I started keeping the same hours he did," she said. "I got as involved with the magazine as I could."

"So you could be close to him."

Lydie nodded, absently pulling in her line. "But after a while it was a losing battle."

She didn't want to reactivate those volatile feelings. It had taken enough time and effort to bunch them up into a manageable core of hurt and hostility that she could safely pack away, deep inside of her.

"So you had more than one reason to leave New York," Justin was saying. She was about to give him a curt reply and change the subject, when a tug of her reel made her sit up hurriedly.

"Got one," she murmured. The line was pulling fast and hard. She was trying

to keep her balance and continue reeling in what appeared to be a fish of some size, but the boat rocked beneath her.

"Careful," came a husky murmur at her ear. Two strong arms were around her waist, hands clasped gently but firmly over her midriff. She could feel Justin's lanky, muscular body against hers, one leg on either side of her, as she struggled with the rod, and the sensation was so distracting that she nearly let the line go.

"It's okay," she gasped, breathless. "I've got everything under control." Everything except her pounding heart-beat and careening pulse, and whether it was a conscious move or not, the reel slipped from her firm grip, and the line whipped out rapidly, then went slack. "Lost it," she muttered, and he let go of her arm. Lydie turned to face him, aware that his other arm was still sliding around her waist, but she was unable to move away in the confined space.

"Sorry," Justin said, with a sheepish smile. "I was only trying to help."

His face was so close, that curl of soft hair over his eyes so touchable. Her body was trembling for no good reason in his gentle grasp. "I was doing fine," she said. "You didn't really need to . . ."

Justin nodded. "I know. But I think I needed to hold you," he said quietly, those dark eyes mesmerizing hers. "And now that I'm holding you . . ."

Her limbs turned to liquid. And as if drugged, she gave herself over to the moist softness of his lips, the sweet-salty taste of him. Then she heard the little splash behind her and realized it was her fishing rod. Justin's lips left hers, and she opened her eyes to see him looking into the water.

"Your pole," he said, with a sudden frown. He released her and, with the grace of a practiced athlete, dove past her into the clear blue water. As the spray hit her, she turned to watch him, wondering if she

was perhaps suffering from sunstroke.

No. It was lust, pure and simple. She'd never believed in chemical combustion between men and women, but she realized now that that was only because she'd never experienced it before. Now that she had, she wasn't sure she liked it.

Justin surfaced, hair wet and gleaming, her fishing rod held triumphantly in his hand. "The water's great!" he called. A few strokes brought him up to the rowboat's side, and the pole dropped at her feet with a clatter. He hung on to the side of the boat with one arm, his expression more serious. "You probably think I'm kind of crazy," he said.

"Crazy? Why?"

"Kissing you like that—again."

"I'm the crazy one for letting you," she said.

"Maybe so. Maybe you shouldn't have anything to do with me."

He was probably right, she mused. "I shouldn't?"

He shook his head. "To tell you the truth, me and relationships just don't mix."

The words sounded oddly familiar. Lydie realized, chagrined, that this was something she'd said herself, not too long ago. "I didn't realize we were in a relationship," she said.

"We're not," he said hurriedly, looking embarrassed. "But we—" He stopped himself and shook his head. "Lydie, I'm not going to deny that I'm very attracted to you," he said soberly. "That's why I . . . let myself get carried away. But I'll try not to let it happen again."

She'd heard her share of lines, come-ons, and original approaches. But Justin Fuller's had to be the most unique. Lydie watched his discomfiture with a mixture of sympathy and faint indignation. Did he have to be quite so apologetic?

"Why?" she found herself asking.

"Are you involved with someone else?"

"No," he said quickly. "I tried it once, but it didn't last."

This, at least was a statement she could relate to, although it was certainly ambiguous. Lydie was tempted to probe further, but the somber look on Justin's face stopped her. "I see," she said.

"Look, I think it's great of you to be spending time with me like this," he went on hurriedly. "I don't want to spoil it with any complications."

Nice of you, she thought. "Me neither," she told him.

"Well then," he said, "I'll try to behave." With a smile of pure goodwill, Justin let go of the boat and dove below the surface again. Lydie stared at the rippling water, not knowing what to think at this point.

"But Lydie, you know what?" He was floating on his back now, grinning widely, seemingly serene as he drifted nearby. "It worked!"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't have a thought in my head!" he crowed. "I think I'm actually . . . what was the word? Relaxing!"

"Congratulations," she said dryly.

"You're terrific," he called, paddling away. "I couldn't have done it without you."

A few days later Justin walked into the Birchwood library, where Lydie put in several hours each week, and somehow, before she knew it, he had wangled a dinner invitation to her parents' house. Lydie thought that her family of misfits — Grandpa and his homemade fireworks and Aunt Helen's menagerie, including one white cockatoo—would throw Justin for a loop, but he'd managed to fit right in.

The Henleys had been the soul of hospitality, of course, and Justin had been polite, quiet, seeming to take

everything in stride. Still, Lydie didn't like the way her mother was eyeing the handsome stranger or how her father and grandfather continually slapped him across the back and winked at Lydie, as if she had snared some prize.

"Want to walk off some of your mother's cooking?" Justin asked as they stood in the moonlight outside the front porch after dinner, a warm breeze stirring the branches overhead.

"Okay." She fell in step beside him. Crickets sang in the tall grass by the side of the road. She felt a shimmer beneath her skin as he took her arm for a moment to guide her over a small ditch in their path. His touch had a resonance that stayed with her after he'd let go.

Lydie wondered if all the women he encountered reacted the same way to this soft-spoken but sharpwitted man whose touch was so electric, who was heart-stoppingly handsome but seemingly unaware of it. Was he a man of many affairs, with none that lasted? Or was he carrying on a myriad of relationships at once, even now, with none taking priority?

"What was she like?" she asked suddenly. "The one that didn't work out?"

Justin cleared his throat, his eyes on the road ahead of them. "Joanne," he said quietly. "She was a bright woman, very talented. She was a systems analyst I met at MIT. Strong-headed and independent . . . to a point." He shook his head. "I think her big mistake was ending up dependent—on me," he added ruefully.

"You make yourself sound like the scourge of womankind," Lydie said. "What did you do that was so horrible? If you don't mind my asking."

Justin shrugged. "Well, I like to think my youth had something to do with it," he said slowly. "I got involved with her before I understood what involvement really means. We were engaged," he ad-

ded, glancing at Lydie as they walked on. "But I was also engaged to the Juno machine, and to a bunch of other patents and projects at the same time."

"I get the picture," Lydie murmured.

"I thought I could juggle my relationship with her like I juggled all my many projects. That was insensitive to begin with." He sighed. "But in addition, I was a lousy juggler. It was bad enough, the times I left her up in the air—but then I wasn't there to catch her when she was coming down."

Lydie touched Justin's arm, sorry that she'd opened up what was clearly still a smarting wound. "I didn't mean to pry," she said softly. "You don't have to tell me any more."

"It's all right." His voice was still stiff with tension. "It was quite a few years ago. She's happy now—married a human-factors analyst from San Diego. And I learned my lesson."

He slowed, turning to look at her in the warm darkness. "At least I like to think I did," he said. "But I'm not sure how much better at it I'd be now—a commitment, I mean. I've grown, but in many ways I'm still the same."

"But you sound like you know yourself pretty well by now," she said.

Justin's lips curved in a faint smile. "Well, I do know one thing. The next time I decide to give myself to a woman, I'm going to give my all. I've learned the hard way what sharing your life with someone has to be about."

Her heart gave a tug. He was saying what she'd want any man to say, any man she loved. . .

Of course, she didn't love Justin. But she was starting to care about him, she realized. "Well, you've learned a lot more than some," she said gently. She started to walk again, aware that they were nearly at the cabin, and by reflex, she looked in the direction of the lake. Justin followed

her gaze, and they walked as if by mutual agreement down to the dock.

"That shoreline over there—" Justin said, gesturing at the dark shape in the distance, on the other side of the lake. "Is that the one in your painting?"

Lydie nodded, surprised he'd remembered. "Yes, I did the first sketches for it right here on the dock."

"I'd love to see more of your work," he said.

Lydie shook her head. "I'm afraid there's nothing to see. That painting was just an experiment, a fluke. I haven't done any serious work in years."

"That's the only thing I don't understand," he murmured. "You're an artist—a painter. If you've decided to get out of commercial graphics work, why don't you paint?"

The usual defensiveness threatened to tighten her throat and sharpen her tongue. Lydie forced herself to answer the question honestly instead of fighting it off. She said evenly, "It seems too self-indulgent. I should be finding a suitable career."

"Suitable career?" he scoffed. "You sound like my guidance counselor in junior high. I'd already skipped two grades and was developing my own computer programs, but she was afraid I wasn't planning my future properly."

"I'm sure you were an exceptional case."

"So are you," he said. "You're immensely talented. You should give yourself the freedom to do what you do best."

"Freedom to starve?" she countered, then shook her head as he stood silently.

"But you're starving your spirit," he said softly.

His words were like a small, hot blade poised at her heart. He was right, of course. Ever since she'd stopped painting, there was an emptiness inside of her that

nothing seemed to fill. And now she felt the sadness well up inside of her again, a sadness it had taken so much effort to suppress...

"I can see it in your eyes," he murmured. "You shouldn't have that look, that little cloudiness in the clear, soft blue..."

Tears were gathering at the corners of those eyes now. She struggled to rein in her emotions. "I had been thinking," she whispered, "of giving it a try again. Just in the meantime..."

"Do it," he said, a husky fierceness in his voice. "Why deprive yourself of the pleasure you get from doing what you want? Haven't you had enough sadness and disappointment?"

The earnest look on his face was so endearing that she felt herself begin to smile, the tears abating. This was what she'd been waiting for someone to say, she realized, her spirits lifting suddenly.

Lydie nodded. "I've just been afraid to start... exposing myself again."

"Do it for you," he said. "Not for the galleries that didn't accept you, or the critics, or the 'them' that are always judging." He smiled. "I've been defying 'them' all my life. Believe me, Lydie, ultimately, it pays off."

"You seem to know what you're talking about, Mr. Fuller," she said.

"Not quite," he murmured. "As a matter of fact, at the moment I'm feeling hypocritical."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not doing what I want," he said huskily and gathered her into his arms, suddenly awakening her senses as he drank deeply of the sweetness of her mouth. Lydie felt a warm tide of arousal sweep through her, and she couldn't swallow the low murmur of delight that escaped her trembling throat as she felt his urgency meet her own.

"Lydie," he murmured. "I know I

shouldn't... but I can't stop myself."

"Then don't stop," she whispered. She was losing control—had lost it already as his hand slipped down her hip to the curve of her thigh. She heard herself whisper his name unsteadily, aching for his touch.

Then, with a little shudder that told her he didn't find it easy, Justin gently pushed her from him. Lips parted, eyes glazed, she stared into the dark pool of his eyes. Why had he stopped?

"Sweetheart..." With an affectionate smile, he pulled her a little closer, gently kissing her on the forehead. "I feel I'm rushing you," he said softly. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to push you into doing anything you don't want to do."

Don't want to? she almost screamed. Every nerve ending in her body wanted... him, without delay.

"It's not fair to you," he was saying softly. "Because you know I can't even say I'll be here for you any longer than tonight."

Startled as she was, Lydie couldn't help being touched to the core by his concern. A lesser man wouldn't have thought past the next minute, let alone the next morning. She stared at him, feeling the flush that suffused her body slowly lessen, her heartbeat begin to slow, as rationality seeped back into her befuddled brain cells.

"Justin Fuller," she murmured. "Are you the last of the urban gentlemen?"

His smile was almost bashful. "I just thought I'd give us both a moment to... well, to take stock of our intentions."

"Justin?"

"Yes?"

"You're a good man," she said.

Before she left, Justin asked Lydie if she was interested in seeing the kind of work he actually did, and the next day, when she arrived at the cabin at noon, she heard a buzzing sound from the lake that was louder and lower than that made by

any motorboat she knew of. It was a seaplane, she realized as it descended, a twin-engine powder-blue Cessna.

"Lydie?" Justin called as he came out of the cabin, a briefcase in his hand.

"Don't tell me," she said. "That's our ride?"

Justin nodded. "Saves time. He's taking us to Chicago. We'll only be gone for the afternoon." He gave her a worried look. "You're not afraid of flying, are you?"

Lydie rolled her eyes and shook her head. Before she knew it, she was being helped aboard the plane by a crew-cut pilot.

Justin had dressed for the trip in his usual jeans and button-down. His hair was unkempt as ever. But Lydie couldn't shake the feeling that someone who could afford to be chauffeured about in a seaplane had been holding out on certain particulars about his life.

"What you're going to see is kind of a pet project of mine," Justin said, as they ate wrapped sandwiches and sipped iced tea. "And it's developed a little hitch. We've patented a microchip with one particular silicon chemical coating that's supposed to do the job, but the lab in Chicago that started making them in bulk isn't reproducing them properly."

"And what's the job the chip's supposed to do?"

"It's part of a chain of components that ultimately conducts the vibrations of human speech through a computer," he said. "We're trying to perfect a voice-activated machine."

"You mean a computer that responds when you talk to it?"

Justin nodded. "No keyboard. You talk, it writes—or calculates. Whatever function you want. Our test models in Denver worked fine, but as soon as we started running off copies, we hit a wall. If I can't locate the specific problem area,

we might have to rethink the whole structure."

The enormity of Justin Fuller's work was beginning to sink in. Lydie realized he'd been downplaying his various projects, but she still wasn't ready for the red carpet that Chicago rolled out when they reached solid ground.

First there was the mile-long silver limousine waiting for them on the dock. The next shock was the look of the plant that apparently worked for Justin's "little company." It was a high-tech, modernistic sprawl of glass and concrete that occupied a full city block in downtown Chicago. They were ushered inside by men in suits who treated Justin as if he were visiting royalty.

Lydie felt a vague sense of disbelief and a growing irritation. Didn't he realize the effect all of this might have? Was she expected to be blasé about a project—one of many, apparently—that obviously involved God-knew-how-many millions of dollars?

There was a workspace the size of an airplane hangar in the main building, where teams of men worked over gleaming Formica tables, silver instruments in gloved hands. Lydie took the tour, a few steps behind Justin and his guides, still dazed at the vastness of the place, the amount of manpower and machinery that was being brought to bear on... Justin Fuller's "pet."

At a certain point, she was politely requested to wait for his return in a private suite outside a conference room. She caught a glimpse of a group of men who looked like members of the *Fortune* 500—rising to greet her tousled-haired companion—and then the door shut behind him.

A friendly secretary served her coffee and pastry, and when Justin emerged some twenty minutes later, his look of worried preoccupation had lifted some-

what. He took Lydie by the arm as they followed some executives down a labyrinth of halls. "Sorry to abandon you like that," he said quietly. "We're almost done here," he said, "and then we'll have dinner."

Lydie nodded stiffly. "Couldn't this humongous staff of yours attend to this problem while you were out of town?"

"If we don't work out the snag, we stand to lose millions," he said. "The machine's already been preordered all over the country. Some of our prospective customers have started to apply a lot of pressure."

"Like who, for example?"

Justin cleared his throat. "The Pentagon. . ."

That did it. Lydie merely nodded and clamped her lips shut. For all she knew, he could be working for the CIA. He might be a billionaire. He might own IBM. When you came right down to it, she had absolutely no idea who he was.

It was dusk on the lake when the hum of the seaplane's motor faded away, and Lydie followed Justin up the path from the dock. At the path around her garden, he paused, turning to face her with a perplexed expression.

"You've been awfully quiet, Lydie," he said. "I'm sorry if I was a bit caught up in things down there. I had hoped you'd find it interesting, though. . ."

"Good grief, Justin!" she exploded. "Why didn't you give me some kind of indication, anything? From the look of things you could be running half of the Western world. I mean, I knew you were a busy man, but—"

She stopped, momentarily speechless. Justin had the sheepish look on his face that was guaranteed to melt all hearts, but she tried to resist melting—at least until she'd found out something more about this infuriatingly mysterious man.

"Well, it's kind of technical," he said, looking like a boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "If I tried to explain all of the patents I'm involved with—"

"I'll settle for the general picture," she said. "For starters—do you own that place?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"And you're personally worth. . . megabucks, aren't you?"

Justin cleared his throat. "I do okay."

"Okay?"

"Look, don't hold it against me, now, all right," he said with a slightly pained expression.

"Hold it against you?" she echoed weakly. "Justin, the only thing I've got against you at the moment is your unwillingness to—to tell me about yourself! I've confided in you enough to feel like an open book. But the way you've been covering up, it's not just modesty. What is it? Why all the secrets?"

Justin sighed. "People sometimes get the wrong idea. You and your family are regular folks, and me, I've been. . . a misfit ever since I can remember. I guess I was seeing if I could, well. . ."

"Pass?" she suggested, unable to keep an incredulous smile from her face. "For a regular kind of guy? Oh, Justin. . ."

"Well, I know I didn't make such a good first impression," he said. "Does it bother you to hang out with a screwball scientist who's turned himself into an industry?"

"I think I can handle it," she said wryly. "In fact, I'd much rather you told me all about your work—as much as I can understand—and about how you got to be where you are at—" She stopped. "Justin, I don't even know how old you are."

"Thirty-three," he said. "Okay, Lydie, I'll put on the coffee, and you can ask me anything you like."

As they sipped the coffee on the little

porch at the cabin's front, Lydie started with random inquiries.

Justin's father was a professor at Columbia University, his mother a classical musician. When his prodigious talents became evident, they'd allowed him to be a quiz kid on a national radio program, where he systematically won the biggest prizes, astounding adults with his memory and imaginative skills.

He'd skipped third and eighth grades, and had entered college at sixteen. He'd already invented his first software program in high school, with a friend, yielding him a sizable income that more than paid for his tuition. He was the youngest to graduate in his class at MIT.

He talked of a life that was achievement building upon achievement—from his first business venture with a major corporation at twenty-two, to his successful work on the reading machine, prompted in part by his father's partial blindness.

"Doesn't sound like you had much time to play softball with the guys on your block," Lydie noted.

"Nope." Justin shrugged. "But I'm not complaining. Still, every now and then I wish I could live a normal week, with normal time to goof off—go fishing," he added with a grin. "It's been a real challenge, taking this vacation. I keep thinking if I'm not at the helm every moment, all the projects I'm involved with are going to go down the tubes."

"Well, did you make any headway today?" she asked.

"We narrowed down the bottleneck area to the coating on the chip. There's nothing for me to do until we get some lab test results sometime tomorrow."

"Then you can go back to your vacation," she said. "Shut down your overworked brain cells for the night."

"All right, guardian angel." He smiled. "Got any other suggestions? What would you be doing on a night like this to

unwind after a day's work?"

Lydie considered. "Do you ever watch old movies on TV?", she asked.

Gravely, Justin shook his head. "The only TV screens I look at are computer screens," he admitted.

"Really?" Lydie sighed. "Boy, you really do need a crash course in mindless unwinding." She gestured at the cabin, saying, "There's an old black-and-white portable in there that's perfect for any film made before 1950," and by the time they were settled on the couch, a giant bowl of hot buttered popcorn between them, Lydie felt more comfortable with Justin than she'd ever imagined she could. He was good company, but more than that, he was sweetly thoughtful, responding seriously, sensitively, to the things she said, and alternately prone to sudden bursts of absurdist humor that kept them both bubbling over with laughter.

She'd uncorked a bottle of red wine long lain dormant in a kitchen cabinet, and the sultry summer air, the warmth of the wine, the touch of his hand, and the glow in his eyes combined to make a heady mixture as they settled back to watch the movie.

Ingrid Bergman was air-borne, flying off with another man as Humphrey Bogart stood on the Casablanca airstrip below, trench coat collar up, ubiquitous cigarette dangling from his lips.

Lydie sighed as the music swelled. Simultaneously, Justin let out a sigh of contentment. She turned to him, smiling, then averted her eyes, aware that her cheeks were still wet with tears.

"Oh, I'm such a sap," she said, quickly wiping the corners of her eyes with the torn corner of a crumpled napkin. "No matter how many times I see this silly picture, I still get all choked up."

Justin's voice was husky as he said, "I've done my share of crying too." He

smiled. "But I'm a grown-up now—and men *my* age certainly never, under any circumstances, cry at the movies."

Lydie laughed again, leaning back against the couch. But as she looked at him taking a sip from his wineglass, she could suddenly imagine with greater clarity the hardship Justin must have endured as a child prodigy.

He *had* been asked to act like an adult, fast—expected to be as emotionally mature as he was mentally advanced. No wonder he tended to be guarded about his feelings.

"It's not easy, bottling yourself up," she mused aloud. "I've done it too, especially when I first went to New York. I had to learn how to be defensive in a hurry."

"You seem to have unlearned it pretty well," he said.

"Well, the way of life's a lot different here," she said. "there's not so much to be guarded about."

Justin nodded. "It's nice," he said simply. "I'll miss it."

"Do you know when you're leaving?" she asked, feeling a pang of anxiety. Suddenly she couldn't imagine *not* being here with Justin.

"I'm not sure," he said. "But even when I do . . ." He leaned forward, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "Shweet-heart," he murmured in a pretty good Bogart imitation, "we'll always have Paris."

Her smile faded as their gazes locked. His hand had settled briefly on her knee, and it stayed there now, spreading a shiver through her at the casual but intimate contact.

His other hand reached out to gently stroke her cheek, fingers tenderly playing with a wisp of her hair, the warmth from his gentle grasp suffusing her, fanning the flame that seemed to flicker with renewed strength between them. Her hand stole out to cover his.

His eyes held the question; his lips parted slightly with a breathless expectation that matched her own, and without a word, his lips dipped down to meet hers.

"Lydie. . . ." he murmured. "Do you want me . . . as I want you?"

She'd been fighting it too long. Involvement . . . noninvolvement. Meaningless words. "Yes," she whispered. "So much. . . ."

He bent his face to hers again, lips brushing each eyelid, kissing the lashes with a tenderness that made her tremble.

She wanted to let him know, somehow, that she was more than ready, no matter what happened, no matter what lay beyond this magical moment they were sharing. She'd never felt so vulnerable with sheer arousal.

"Justin," she whispered as she felt his hesitation. "It's all right. . . ."

He lifted her chin with his thumb and forefinger. "Is it?" he murmured. "Is it all right that I've fallen for you, head over heels? All right to love you. . . .?"

She nodded, her heart beating with hummingbird speed. Love. It was a word she hadn't wanted to think about, but she knew the feeling, had already felt it growing within her. Would he love her with the tenderness she felt? Or with the fierceness that she felt as well?

Justin's strong hands gathered her closer to him. She shivered as his fingers traced the line of her spine through the soft material of her dress.

His lips broke from hers. "I've been needing to feel you in my arms again," he murmured. "You're sure you don't mind?"

Mind? Lydie couldn't help smiling at his concern. She was delighting in the way he prolonged each moment, anticipation making the air electric.

"If you're going to stop me, stop me now," he murmured, his voice a rasp of arousal. She shook her head. Instead, she

reached to grasp the clasp of his jeans, delighting in his quick intake of breath as her fingers fumbled at the belt.

They both seemed seized with the same impatience. Both smiled as they started a wordless race to disrobe, and for a long moment after this frenzied flurry, he gazed at her as she lay back on the couch, his eyes drinking her in with obvious delight. "Lydie," he breathed in a ragged whisper. "You're so incredibly beautiful. . . How could I have deprived myself a moment longer?"

He hovered above her, his gaze lingering on the quivering pulse at the base of her throat. Lydie tangled her hands in his thick dark hair. Her back arched as the feelings surging inside of her grew, and her breath came in gasps now as she moved, eyes closed tightly, beneath him.

She could feel the sweat gathered at the back of his neck, and the slickness of her own body. When the couch gave a loud squeak of protest beneath their weight, they both froze, then began to laugh together in the darkness.

"Isn't this couch a little . . . adolescent?" he whispered, and with a deep-throated growl, he swept her up into his arms. "I have a burning desire to make love to you in the great outdoors." Aloft, she laughed, her arm tight around his neck as he carried her to the doorway.

The night breeze felt heavenly on her moist skin as they stepped to the lawn, the evening sky ablaze with stars. Justin carried her easily to the grassy knoll on the cabin's side, then gently lowered her.

Lydie pulled him down with her, suddenly impatient with desire, reveling in the weight of his smooth, rugged body fitting to her softer curves.

She'd never known this kind of pleasure before, a prolonged, sweetly savage desire that ebbed and flowed, ever-building between them. She saw the stars glimmering above, awed by her own pas-

sion as his gentleness gave way to a surer, stronger touch that spurred her on to more reckless abandon.

Lydie moved sinuously with him, savoring the feel of his hard strength within her yielding softness. The throb of her pulse mingled with his heartbeat, and together they sought the perfect rhythm, found the tempo of the dance.

It was his idea to cool off in the lake afterward, but hers to take the rubber raft out. It was big enough for the two of them to lie in comfortably, and it felt marvelously safe and secure, their own little island floating off the coast of the world.

Time seemed suspended as they huddled together in the warm darkness. How long had they lain together in the soft grass? How many words of love had they whispered. She didn't know, or care, feeling blissfully fulfilled as they floated on, the water lapping quietly over her toes.

Sleep stole over her and then receded, dreams merging with reality. He was telling her stories of stars and quantum physics, inventing marvelous futures for them and everyone, then caressing her into lazy, pulsing arousal for more exultant love play.

They overturned the raft, of course, and swam through the cool water, through the darkness of an endless night. And then they were on the raft again, wrapped around each other under a canopy of stars.

The next evening, flushed and breathless with excitement at having just completed a new painting, Lydie paused at the screen door of the cabin. She raised her fist, about to knock, then stopped herself, peering inside.

She'd rushed like a madwoman to scrub the paint off, shower, wash her hair, put on her white, summer shift, gather up her just-dry painting and get

here at the stroke of eight—well, only a few minutes late. They had reservations at the Fisherman's Inn in Larchwood, the fanciest restaurant around these parts, and since it was to be their most formal date so far, she'd wanted to be ready on time.

But Justin Fuller was sitting at his computer, telephone at his ear, still wearing the pair of jeans and T-shirt she'd left him in that morning—still in practically the same position, for Pete's sake!

Lydie sighed and opened the door, being careful not to scrape the edge of the canvas on the doorframe as she entered. She rested it gently against the table near Justin and then came up behind him, sliding her hands around his waist.

"Calibrations still don't check out," he was saying into the telephone, his fingers darting over the keyboard in his lap. As he felt Lydie's embrace, he stiffened slightly, startled, then relaxed and leaned back in his chair to nuzzle her neck.

Somewhat mollified, she ruffled his hair, then sat in the chair to his side and waited patiently for him to wrap things up. She saw, with a vague sense of foreboding, that he was knee-deep in computer print-out spreadsheets and wore an expression that was far from relaxed.

Restless, she got up and paced around behind him, then seized the painting. She spent a few minutes propping it up to catch the light from the lamp on the table, and by the time she was done, miraculously, Justin was getting off the phone.

"Hey, good-lookin'," he murmured.

Lydie went to him. Her arms slid around his neck as she welcomed him with a warm and provocative kiss. He tasted good. He felt good. It was all coming back to her fast.

When the mist of passion that clouded her eyes finally faded, and his lips left hers, Lydie gazed up into his dark, velvet

eyes, trying to recapture the feeling of annoyance she'd been having moments earlier, but it wasn't easy.

Justin cleared his throat. "Now, Lydie, don't get upset," he began, "but I'm not going to be ready to go for a while."

The annoyance returned with lightning speed. "Justin," she groaned.

"I'm as unhappy about it as you are," he sighed. "But we're still trying to work out this chip problem. I've had the guys at the plant working through Labor Day on it," he added pointedly as she started to move away. "So if I have to be late for dinner..."

"I know," she muttered. "Here's the part where I'm supposed to be marvelously understanding."

"It would help," he agreed with a faint smile.

"I'll give it a try," she said. Then the reason for her initial jubilation came back to her. "Justin! You can take a one-minute break, can't you?"

He cast an anxious glance at his computer, but he nodded nonetheless. "Of course."

Lydie took his hand and led him over to the table. She stepped back, holding her breath as Justin stood stock-still, gazing at the canvas in silence.

"When did you do this?" he asked after a few moments. His voice sounded pleased, but too noncommittal for her taste.

"Just hours ago. What do you think?"

"It's beautiful," he said.

"You really think so?" Lydie stood next to him, trying to see the canvas through his eyes. She'd gone back to work on it, smoothed out the rough edges, cleaned up areas that she'd been afraid were too violently colorful. Her only worry was that she might have gone too far.

"Yes," Justin murmured, leaning forward to peer more closely at the surface of

the painting. "I like it."

Lydie knew she could be oversensitive, but his reaction still troubled her. He was supposed to love it! And she had the feeling he was editing his response.

"You don't really like it," she said.

"No, I do," he said, then straightened up. "But..."

"But what?" she demanded.

Justin looked from her to the painting and then back again, seeming to weigh his response. "Well," he said cautiously, "it looks like parts of it have been painted over a bit."

Lydie frowned. "I did go back and redo some things," she admitted, feeling a tightness take hold of her that started at her throat and spread to clench the rest of her body.

Justin was nodding thoughtfully. "Why?"

"Why?" she repeated, wondering why she was being so defensive. He was right—she knew what he was getting at even before he said it, and she knew instinctively the mistake she'd made. But owning up to it seemed much too painful.

"You had second thoughts, didn't you?" he suggested quietly.

Lydie shrugged, her heart racing.

"I can see the first impulse there on the canvas," he went on, "and it's quite amazing—". Then he gazed at her, and she could see a glimmer of disappointment in his eyes. "You had it," he said gently. "But then... you got cold feet, Lydie. You tried to cover it up."

Lydie stared at him, lips set tight. Why did he have to be so damned perceptive? She was searching for a suitable reply to justify her actions, when the phone rang. Lydie whirled to look at it, wishing it would disintegrate.

Justin made an apologetic gesture and moved past her to answer it. *Don't!* she nearly yelled, but she stood, frozen, as he reached down and picked up the receiver

on its second ring. "Yes? Right, I still have it on my screen..."

He looked at her, miming exasperation as he listened. Lydie stood where she was, her emotions churning. She suddenly felt like a reprimanded child who'd come running over with her latest mud pie, only to be told it was... mud.

"Jeff, can you hold on a moment?"

Justin covered the mouthpiece. "Lydie, I'm really sorry, but I do have to take this call. You understand, don't you?"

She understood. As Justin returned to his conversation, she watched him take his seat before the screen. He was already light-years away from her, dealing with equations and calibrations that meant millions of dollars and would affect millions of people.

What made her think she could be as important? What was a three-by-two canvas smeared with oils, next to a minuscule microchip coveted by the Pentagon?

Lydie walked stiffly to the table. She took the canvas down and headed for the door. She paused there, staring at the back of Justin's head, willing him to turn around.

It wasn't until the door had slammed behind her and she had hurried to the car that Lydie realized how much she'd secretly counted on his getting up, following her, trying to stop her. But he hadn't.

So here she was, all dressed up with nowhere to go. Lydie got into her car and gunned her motor and pulled down the driveway with a screech of tires.

When Lydie pulled up in front of her parents' house several hours later, she braked suddenly and peered through the windshield, disoriented. There was another car in the driveway, blocking hers.

She climbed out of the car, quietly shut the car door, and walked up the path to the front porch.

For no explicable reason, she was hum-

ming, but the song died on her lips. A figure had risen out of the darkness on the porch, and a voice that didn't sound particularly relaxed rose with it.

"Where in heaven's name have you been?"

Lydie frowned, staring up at Justin Fuller. What was he looking so hot and bothered about? "Out," she muttered.

He was down the steps now, striding up to her with eyes blazing. Justin took hold of her by the shoulders with a not-so-gentle grip. "You're all right?"

"Course I'm all right," she said, trying to move out of his grasp. That wasn't an easy task.

"Where were you?" he demanded. Lydie swallowed, her slightly devil-may-care feeling evaporating. She'd never seen Justin Fuller angry. She was suddenly quite certain it wasn't a sight she wanted to see again.

"I was somewhere in Hicksville," she said defiantly. "Playing with the local colors, so to speak."

Justin swore softly under his breath and abruptly let her go. Lydie nearly lost her balance, but she straightened up in a hurry. She didn't quite understand Justin's wrath. What did *he* have to be angry about? She was the one who'd been left high and dry after having her labor of love so casually dismissed. Lydie cleared her throat.

"I'd like to go in now," she said politely.

"How could you do this?" He was facing her, jaw tight, brow furrowed.

"How could I? It was easy. Well, for heaven's sake, Justin," she said, taking a step back. "You were busy with your phone and your chip and everything—I wasn't about to have my dinner at breakfast."

"You might have waited."

"You might have taken a few more minutes to talk to me," she said evenly.

"Or told me where you were going," he added.

"I didn't know where I was going," she exclaimed, her anger mounting. "And since when do I have to tell you about every move I make?"

Justin was silent. When he spoke again, it was obvious it took a lot of effort to keep his voice as low and steady as he did. "I've been down every road in this town and half the roads in this state for the past four or five hours," he said, with exaggerated calm.

Lydie shook her head. "I don't see why you—"

"I even got the police involved," he went on. "Not that they were much help. Apparently, all of your local buddies wouldn't lose any sleep if you fell off the edge of the earth when they weren't looking. Even your family assumed you were perfectly okay—"

"And why shouldn't they?" she protested. "I'm a big girl! I took care of myself without any difficulty before I met you, and I'm sure I'll take care of myself fine after you leave!"

That shut him up. Justin shoved his hands in his pockets, lips set tight, and turned away again.

"Don't you think you're overreacting?" she said.

Justin whipped around as if he'd been hit. "I'm overreacting? Look at you—running out on me like that just because I had to deal with a phone call."

"Which was obviously more important than me or my feelings!" she shot back. "You know how much that painting meant to me. And after blithely informing me that it wasn't any good, you return to your—"

"You little . . . idiot," he said softly, shaking his head. "I never said that."

"Yes, I'm an idiot," she returned, her anger flaring up again. "For thinking that I could get involved with you for more

than a day. It's not that I'm blaming you, Justin—you never promised me anything more. It's my fault for getting carried away."

"Don't say that!" His face was ashen. "We *are* involved—and being involved means you can't just run off like that and think it doesn't matter!"

"But you," she reminded him hotly, "can have planes fly you here and there at a moment's notice. You can be here and then gone, for all I know! And even when you're here, it's your work that takes priority. Why shouldn't it?" she added bitterly.

"That's not how I want it to be," he exclaimed. "I want it to be you and me, together—"

She sighed. "Didn't you say that you and relationships don't mix? And the irony is, I've said the same thing!"

"You're being irrational," he said sharply. "If you'd only—"

"No, I'm being rational," she cried. "I came to my senses." She strode quickly up the steps, suddenly exhausted, tired of the whole messy, hurtful situation.

"Lydie..."

Lydie paused and turned back to face him, her hand on the doorknob. "Justin, maybe we just shouldn't see each other," she said, her voice unnaturally stiff. "I don't think this is good for either of us."

Justin stared up at her, his expression unfathomable. Was it pain or anger that flashed in the depths of his eyes? She couldn't see, and wasn't sure she wanted to. Calm as she might have sounded, she was running scared. She couldn't go through it all again...

"If that's what you want." His voice was low and pained in the darkness behind her.

"Good-bye, Justin," she murmured, and she hurriedly opened the door and escaped into the safety of the house.

In the week that followed Lydie was a

holy mess—cranky at breakfast, morose at lunch, nearly comatose at dinner. But through it all, nobody in her family had complained, taken offense, or demanded explanations, and that was enough to make tears well in Lydie's eyes.

She had been making phone calls, and one contact seemed to be coming through—a job doing graphics for a small film company in Hollywood. It wasn't quite the fresh start she would have hoped for: it was even a step back, conceivably. But the Henleys had greeted the news with enthusiasm. Anything to make her happy, seemed to be the current of thought.

Lydie, feeling a little guilty, had let herself be talked into spending the afternoon fishing with her father at Piker's Island.

"If you do take that job in Los Angeles," her mother had chided, "he won't be seeing much of you for a while."

And so now in knee-high boots Lydie found herself wading through the marshes, rod and reel in hand.

She turned, frowning, looking for the figure of her father in the distance behind her. They'd barely gotten started, Mr. Henley waxing enthusiastically about the wonders of stalking coho salmon and steelhead trout, when he'd summarily abandoned her. He'd left some bait in the car, he'd said, but he was certainly taking his sweet time.

She listened for any movement in the tall grass, and she thought she heard a car motor, which was odd. Finally, impatient and a little hot in the hazy late-afternoon sun, she started back.

She was already past their parking spot when she realized the car was gone. For a moment, she stood frozen, doubting her own memory. Hadn't it been parked right over that rise? Utterly confused, she began to walk farther on. Maybe she'd misjudged the distance.

Five, ten minutes later, she began to panic. It seemed she was completely lost. She was opening her mouth to give an existential yell into the surrounding wilderness, when she glimpsed someone through the trees that lined the beach.

"Hey!" she called, and she picked up speed, fumbling her way through the bushes growing in the ankle-deep water.

The fisherman—not her father, by the color of his clothes—turned in her direction, and then began walking toward her. Lydie slogged through the murky water, rounded a bend, and then stopped short, dropping her rod.

"Good grief," said Justin Fuller. "Don't tell me you're also a fishing guide."

It crossed Lydie's mind that he looked about as at home on Piker's Island as a typewriter on a whale's back. Justin was dressed for concrete or carpet, omnipresent button-down shirt over wrinkled corduroys. His black loafers were soaked, and squeaked as he stepped closer, sweat beaded on his confused and reddened face.

For a moment, her heart throbbed with unbridled affection. As he gazed at her, she thought she saw a flash of excited gladness in his eyes, but then he deliberately looked away from her.

"I seem to be a little lost," he muttered. "And you?"

"I was just . . . walking," she said lamely.

They exchanged a quick, wary glance, and then simultaneously turned back in the directions from which they'd come. But this clearly struck them both as too ridiculous, because they immediately turned around again.

"How have you been?" he inquired with the stiffness of someone speaking a foreign dialect.

"Oh, fine," she assured him. "And

you?"

"Could be better," he muttered darkly, avoiding her eyes.

She'd forgotten how shy he was. She'd forgotten how sexy he looked with a sweat worked up. Lydie felt a warm throb of empathy for his discomfort that she immediately ignored, reminding herself that she wanted nothing to do with Justin Fuller.

"Well," he said with forced brightness. "Catch anything?"

Lydie looked at her fishing rod, then back to Justin, who was carrying one as well.

"Justin . . .," she said dubiously, her throat suddenly tight with tension, "what are you doing here?"

"Good question," he muttered, raking a hand through his hair. "I thought I was keeping your grandfather company on a fishing trip. He called me out of the blue and insisted. Seen him lately?"

"Grandpa?" She stared at him, confused. "No, I was with my father—"

For a long moment, they merely looked at each other.

"Don't tell me," Justin began. "Your father convinced you to come along with him on a fishing trip, and then, no sooner had you arrived than he . . ."

" . . . had to go back to the car for some bait," Lydie finished, unable to keep back a smile at the absurdity of the situation.

"Your grandfather said he'd left his pipe in the glove compartment," Justin said.

"Grandpa doesn't smoke a pipe," she informed him.

"Oh." Justin cleared his throat and looked her in the eye more directly. "Crafty people, these Henleys," he said.

Lydie nodded. Her heart was booming in her chest. She gave her hair a toss, chin raised in a perfect posture of defiant indifference. It might have worked well if she

hadn't accidentally let go of her fishing pole, which thumped to the wet ground, causing her to give a startled jump.

The loss of poise was lethal. The next thing she knew, Justin was at her side, and they were bumping heads in an attempt to pick up the rod. Then it was her hand he was reaching for, and his shoulder she was steadying herself with, and somehow, before she knew quite how it had happened, she was wrapped up in Justin Fuller's arms.

"Lydie," he breathed before his lips closed over hers, and she moaned his name.

At last, with a shuddering breath, she broke away, gazing up into dark eyes that were hooded with passion.

"Whoever said I had any brains in my head at all?" he murmured, with a deep throaty chuckle. "How could I have possibly stayed away from you this long?"

Lydie let out a long sigh of pleasure, eyes half closing again. "I've been miserable, you know," she whispered.

"I thought you might be happier. . ."

"Fat chance," she muttered wryly, and he smiled.

"I wonder if we could . . . find some drier land," he said. "And have a talk? Do you have any idea where we might—"

"It's a very small island," she told him. "I was here once before, when I was a girl."

They made their way through the tall reeds to a rise where there was, finally, some solid ground, and under the cool shadow of a sheltering elm, they settled down together.

"Hey," Justin said, stopping her fingers as they ran restlessly over his thigh. "You've been painting again."

Lydie looked down at her blue-stained thumb. "Out of desperation—" she admitted, her words cut short by a sharp intake of breath as he lifted her hand, kis-

sing the tender skin between thumb and forefinger. "Justin, I'm sorry I acted that way the other night—"

"I never should have taken that phone call," he said vehemently. "I've been kicking myself ever since. And I should have thought more before I spoke to you about your painting."

"No," she said firmly, sitting up. "You said the absolutely right thing. I was trying to cover myself up when I reworked that canvas. I was falling back into my worst old habit—thinking about what people might think . . . about what you might think. I'd exposed myself and I was starting to feel vulnerable."

"I love you exposed," he murmured, and there was a seriousness beneath the seemingly flip comment that touched her deeply.

"You do, don't you?" she whispered. "You believe in me. I guess that's why I was so supersensitive to your criticism. I wanted you to love what I did, unreservedly."

"I love *you*," he said simply. "The untouched-up, undisguised you."

Lydie was silent, relishing the soft, pressure of his hand enfolding hers. "Justin, I never realized you had a temper like that, though," she said quietly. "To tell you the truth, it was a little frightening."

Justin nodded, a sober expression on his face. "I did have reasons for being as upset as I was that night," he said. "But they were reasons that had to do with Joanne, and not you." He stood up, continuing to talk. "One night, when we were at MIT, Joanne and I had a date to go over our plans—to actually decide when we would get married, and where." He sighed. "We had put it off so many times, mainly because my projects were piling up." He shook his head. "I had to break the date. Sound familiar?" He shot Lydie one quick glance, then went back to his

pace, shoulders hunched, eyes downcast. "Joanne went nuts," he said grimly. "She'd had enough—enough procrastination, enough stealing me away from my work when I should have made the time to be with her. We fought. It was loud, ugly—awful. And then she ran out."

Justin's face darkened as he paused, staring into space. "I felt pretty bad, but I was still angry myself. I stayed right where I was. I finished the work I had to do, which took a lot of the pressure off." He grimaced. "I was just going to call her, ready to apologize and make amends, when the phone rang."

"Joanne had been in an accident. She'd been driving around the campus letting off steam, and I guess she was driving recklessly. She ran a light, broadsided another car. . . They were calling from the emergency room."

Justin exhaled a deep breath. "I won't go into the gruesome details, but Joanne spent the better part of a year in the hospital."

"Justin. . ." Lydie shook her head helplessly, not knowing what she could say.

"It threw her career for a loop, to say the least," he continued. "But she was strong, and she got back on her feet." He held her gaze, his eyes seeming to shimmer with sadness. "Without me, after a while. The accident finished our relationship."

"But, Justin, surely she didn't . . . blame you."

"I blamed myself!" he exclaimed. "My God," he muttered, forcibly subduing his voice, "I've never felt such guilt in my life. If I'd only this; if I'd only that—For a while I stopped working. I even considered dropping out of the world altogether." He gave a rueful chuckle.

"I went off the deep end, briefly—and resurfaced. Hey, I was the one who had it easy—my scars were only psychic." He

shrugged. "And then some friends of mine coaxed me back into action." He looked at her again. "I've been working ever since," he said quietly. "Working hard."

All these years, she mused silently, getting to her feet, taking his arm, pulling him closer to her. Lydie felt her insides ache for him.

"I'm sorry, Justin—so sorry," she whispered, and she clung to him, kissing his chin, lips, cheeks.

Slowly, hesitantly, he lifted his arms to hold her. And then he did hold her, more forcefully, returning her kisses. She felt the power of their passion already overwhelming the bitterness and remorse.

"I was going to let you go," he said, eyes clouding again as he gazed at her. "I had my mind made up. From the way things were going between us. I thought I'd have to give up any thought of trying again. I just seemed doomed to failure. But there was one problem."

"Which was?" she whispered.

"I couldn't," he said simply. "I'm too much in love with you. I don't care if I have to cut my workload in half, sell one company, step down off the board of another—throw my computer into Lake Michigan!"

"Don't be crazy, Justin," she protested.

"I'm crazy already. Crazy for you," he said, hugging her to him. "I didn't realize I was still capable of having a good time until we hooked up. I'm spoiled now, Lydie. I want more. I want to watch more old movies. I want more popcorn to eat from your delicious sticky fingers. I want to jump in a lake on a regular basis. I want to marry you. Lydie," he said, smiling at her bewildered gaze. "You're the one who's given me lessons in loosening, in being spontaneous. Well, what we've got here is spontaneous combustion. And now I want to own the patent on this particular chemical reaction."

"You can't be serious—" she began, but her heart threatened to burst as she looked into his eyes and knew he was.

"Do I make you happy?" he asked.

She'd never been made so happy in her life. She couldn't deny it as she looked at him. And the thought of a future with Justin, a future she hadn't thought possible, filled her with an excitement that was overwhelming, even as her head whirled crazily with questions.

"Well, yes," she said. "But—"

"Gloriously happy?"

"Yes," she admitted, feeling a blush come over her as she saw the erotic implications gleaming in his eyes. "But, Justin—"

He kissed her before she could say another word, and then held a finger to

her tingling lips. "I'm offering you quite an opportunity," he went on. "You can paint and paint to your heart's content. You can hold down as many jobs as you want, of course," he added as she struggled to speak again. "I've kind of gotten used to running into you anywhere I go.

"And every moment of the day or night that I don't absolutely have to be immersed in my work," he went on after kissing her, reducing her to a mass of deliciously shivering nerves, "I'm yours—every bit of me. What do you think? Have I convinced you?"

"Umm," she sighed. "Convince me some more, Justin, I think I like this part the best..."

"I'll be glad to," he whispered. "Anywhere and always..." ♥

Heart Healthy Recipe

VEAL WITH ARTICHOKE

- | | |
|--|---|
| 2 cloves garlic | 1 1-pound can solid-pack tomatoes |
| 2 tablespoons oil | ½ cup sherry or sauterne |
| 2 pounds veal round, cut into bite-size pieces (have butcher flatten pieces to ¼ inch thick) | ¼ teaspoon oregano |
| | 2 10-ounce packages frozen artichoke hearts |

In a heavy skillet, sauté the garlic in oil. Remove the garlic.

Season the veal with pepper. Brown in the oil.

Add the tomatoes, wine and oregano, mixing well, and the artichoke hearts.

Cover and simmer 45 to 60 minutes, or until the meat is tender.

Yield: 8 servings Approx. cal/serv.: 310

NOTE: This recipe can be prepared with chicken or turkey breast instead of veal.

Heart Healthy Recipes are from the Third Edition of the American Heart Association Cookbook. Copyright © 1973, 1975, 1979 by the American Heart Association, Inc.



**American Heart
Association**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED
WE'RE FIGHTING FOR YOUR LIFE

Autumn Flames

In the midst of a Chilean storm, Lily Dunbar is thrust into the arms of Reece Wakefield, a successful rancher. Can he lure her away from the life that she has forged for herself to find a real home in his arms?

— SARA ORWIG —

A raw, bitter gust of wind swept across the snow-covered, rugged peaks of the Chilean Andes. Whistling down a rocky slope, the wind buffeted dark green beech trees and rattled the bright blue nylon of a small tent perched on the mountainside.

Inside the tent Lily Dunbar smoothed her black curls as she looked down at the one-eyed cat curled on her bedroll. "I'll be back soon, General Jackson." She patted

his gray- and black-striped head.

She stepped outside and glanced to the south. Above the mountains, gray clouds boiled into sight, their gathering menace a threat to her plans for the day. She was packed, ready to leave by noon if a storm didn't interfere. It was October thirty-first, Halloween, but early spring on the other side of the equator in Chile. Before she left, she wanted to spend one last hour on the mountain.

From AUTUMN FLAMES by Sara Orwig, a Loveswept Book. Copyright © 1983 by Sara Orwig. Reprinted by permission of Bantam Books. All rights reserved.

As she walked, dried grass rustled and scraped against her brown leather boots. Even though the wind was cold, she felt invigorated. Gray boulders poked through patches of snow on the slopes that ran to a narrow, forest-covered valley below. To the east and far down the mountainside, a movement caught her attention, and she paused.

A silvery stream cascaded down to the valley; near its edge on a slab of rock stood a man dressed in black boots, jeans, and a black jacket trimmed in wolf fur. Wind tangled the locks of his dark brown hair. While he gazed through binoculars, he held a rifle in the crook of his arm. From information gained in town when she bought supplies, Lily knew she was camped near the boundaries of a large sheep ranch owned by a Welshman, and she wondered if the man was from that ranch.

A gust of frigid air swept against her, stinging her cheeks. Her gaze shifted to see the object of the man's intent observation.

Within seconds she saw what he watched, and her heart dropped.

Across the valley on the opposite mountainside, protected and half-hidden by beech trees, was a herd of guanacos, the large animals with limpid brown eyes that Lily had come to Chile to study.

She had no doubt about the menacing purpose of the man's watchfulness; the rifle held in the crook of his arm all too clearly indicated he was a hunter. Even while she watched, he lowered the binoculars and raised his rifle to take aim.

"No!" Her cry was carried away by the wind.

Still unaware of danger, the animals moved higher, into the trees, and the man lowered the gun, waiting with tigerlike patience for his prey.

Lily knew she couldn't get to him in time to save the animals. In desperation

she whirled and dashed the short distance back to her tent and snatched her Smith & Wesson revolver.

With the heavy, cumbersome weapon in her hand, she ran outside, slipping and scrambling to find a vantage point to see the man. Helplessness and fear for the animals filled her when she spotted the hunter, rifle raised, ready to fire.

Without hesitation, aiming high above the man's head, she fired.

The blast was deafening, and the heavy pistol recoiled in her hand. Nearby, birds flapped away noisily. Instantly the man whirled, dropped to his knee, and fired in return; the bullet chunked into a tree beside her.

Startled and frightened, in an automatic reaction, Lily squeezed the trigger again.

She hadn't meant to fire the second time. To her horror the man tumbled forward on his face.

"Oh, no!" she gasped as she dropped the gun. She ran, sliding down the slope, terrified she'd killed him.

She fell, scraping her palms as she hit the ground. Pebbles and sticks bit into her skin, but she didn't give any thought to the pain. She jumped to her feet, oblivious of the rough, uneven ground and the mournful whistle of the wind. All she heard was the pounding of her heart; she wasn't conscious of the clatter of rocks as she dislodged them in her headlong run down the mountain.

Breathlessly she dashed toward the inert figure stretched on the rocky terrain below. An icy chill of fear swept over her. "Oh, please be all right," she whispered, unaware of making a sound. She reached him and knelt to touch his warm cheek.

With breath-stopping swiftness, like a demon unleashed, he exploded into ruthless action. In a furious burst of shoulders, fists, and hard legs, he lunged at her.

Breath was knocked out of Lily and he flung her on her back. Instantly he straddled her and raised a fist to strike.

Lily gazed up into angry, deep blue eyes. Time stopped. The man's fist hung in the air while he looked at her. A thin trickle of blood ran down his temple. Their gaze locked, held.

Clouds high overhead matched his dark, angry face while the wind tumbled his brown curls. A streak of gray ran through the curls above his forehead. He had the bluest eyes she'd ever seen, the color of a clear, azure sky. With a smoldering menace, his eyes narrowed, and he lowered his fist.

Upset, she lapsed into her native English and said, "I'm sorry." She realized what she had done and asked in Spanish how badly he was hurt.

When he answered, his voice was deep and husky, with a rough quality. He shook his head and reached into his hip pocket to get a white handkerchief. While he held it against his scalp, he replied in English, speaking with a slight accent, a trace of Spanish in the rolling r's. "It's surface, a scratch, I'm sure. Why the hell did you fire at me?"

"I thought you were about to shoot a guanaco. I fired above you, but I didn't mean to hurt you. I only wanted to stop you from shooting the lovely guanacos."

One dark eyebrow curved in question. He asked, "What difference would it make to you if I shot a guanaco? This is my property."

She drew a sharp breath. "No, it's not! I have a map that clearly marks government land."

Laughter transformed his features, softening the harshness of a strong jaw and prominent cheekbones. A web of lines gathered at the corners of his eyes, and the creases that bracketed his mouth deepened. "I know my own boundaries." He waved his right hand. "You probably

came in through the south. I don't have fences there." As he held the handkerchief against his head, he studied her intently. "You didn't answer my question."

Disbelief about the ownership of the land shook her. She felt certain she wasn't camped on his property, but he was right—he ought to know his own boundaries.

More worrisome at the moment was her consciousness of his masculinity and her submissive position. He still straddled her, with his knees on both sides of her; his inner thighs pressed against her rib cage, and she wished he would move.

She realized he waited for an answer and said, "I'm here to study guanacos, to do what I can to save and protect them. I don't want to see one killed."

"That's charitable, considering a sixteenth of an inch lower in your aim and I would've been killed," he said.

She burned with embarrassment and anguish. "I'm sorry. I tried to fire over your head. When you turned and fired back quickly, I squeezed the trigger accidentally."

He studied her closely. "You're the American. I remember now; one of my men told me there was an American woman in this area. What state are you from?"

"Iowa."

"Isn't someone with you?"

Again, she was acutely conscious of her vulnerability, of his maleness as he remained astride her. She answered in a level voice, "No, I'm alone."

The words seemed to reverberate in her mind. Alone. Defenseless. She watched him as he looked down at her.

And she felt an electrifying current pass between them, a spark that was as ancient as the beginning of time.

He held her chin gently, then moved his finger back and forth on her jaw while he

looked at her. His gaze shifted to her mouth, and her lips tingled from the onslaught of hunger in his eyes.

He looked into her eyes again, and she knew he intended to kiss her.

She tried to twist to escape, to hold back. She didn't want to be kissed by anyone, and certainly not by this rough stranger. For an instant she jerked her mouth away from his. His fingers held her chin firmly, not hurting her, while his lips teased hers.

"Don't please," she whispered.

"Shh." His kiss was slow, deliberate, tantalizing, and it sent a burst of warmth through her. His mouth coaxed a response. She didn't want his kiss. She tried to resist, to say no, but the sound was merely a groan. Shock and anger filled her, and she moved her hands to push against granite shoulders as unyielding and hard as his thighs. But in spite of her reluctance and her fury, exquisite sensations blossomed. Sweet agony filled her, intoxicating her. His firm lips were warm, his breath hot with faint traces of smoke. Relentlessly, with consummate skill, he explored her mouth.

She felt the need to move, to shift her hips. In desperation she pushed violently against his chest. He straightened. His breath was as ragged as her own. For a moment she felt a stab of shock at the look of wonder in his eyes.

And she thought she understood why—that had been a spectacular kiss! Too spectacular. Putting the thought out of mind, she tried to collect her wits and regain some control of the situation. "Are you finished? You can move away now."

Amused, he rose with ease. To avoid the hand that stretched to help her, Lily gained her feet quickly. She faced him as he studied her.

He touched her wide gold wedding band. "You're married."

In a tone that sounded far more calm

than she felt, she said, "I was." Why did he have such a direct way of looking at her? She couldn't avoid those blue eyes.

"Divorced?"

"No, I'm widowed. I'm a principal at a grade school in Des Moines." There wasn't any reason to add the last, she told herself.

"I'm Reece Wakefield. I'm widowed, too," he said.

She accepted his proffered hand, felt the warm fingers close around hers in a firm clasp while she said, "I'm Lily Dunbar. They told me in town about you. You own a sheep ranch, don't you?"

"Yes." He glanced around. "I don't see any gear."

"I have a tent, and everything's there. I leave today."

He shook his head. "Sorry to change your plans, but those storm clouds mean business. We have a wild storm brewing."

She followed the wave of his hand and looked up at the menacing gray clouds that had boiled over the southern ridge of the mountains only a short time ago. Now, they blotted out the sun as they rolled in a dark, churning mass. She sighed. "I think you're right."

"Will you miss a plane reservation or miss meeting someone?"

She studied the clouds. "Neither. I just earned a master's degree in school administration, and I've accepted a job replacing the principal of a grade school who's leaving because of pregnancy. But I don't start for over two weeks, not until November fifteenth."

"I received a radio message early today. This storm will cause floods in the valleys." As if adding emphasis to his words, a howling gust of wind buffeted them. Lily realized the weather was growing worse rapidly. "I'll just wait and leave later," she said.

"You don't have to stay out here. You can come to my house."

The last few minutes in his presence had been tumultuous, a shock to her system in several ways she didn't care to explore. She laughed. "Thanks, but I feel safer here in the storm."

A dark eyebrow arched in question. "My kiss was that threatening?"

"No, your aggressive methods are. I don't want you to take charge of my life."

He grinned. "I wouldn't dream of it. You don't have to outwait the storm in a tent. It's not safe. Where are you camped?"

She waved her hand to the north. "Up that slope."

To her consternation he headed in that direction. "Let's have a look at your campsite." He moved ahead a few yards before turning to ask, "Are you coming?"

As she hesitated, she faced the lopsided, mocking grin that so aggravated her.

Thunder rumbled, and a gust of wind whipped up dried leaves, swirling them through the air. Reece Wakefield motioned. "Come on, Lily. Earth and heaven are working against you."

There wasn't anything else to do except join him. "I've been here in storms before," she snapped. "Usually I come in the summer, but this time I came early."

"Usually? You've done this before?"

"This is my third trip. I love the guanacos, and I love Chile. It's beautiful here." For a moment she forgot the man and gazed around at the mountains. To the south a sheet of rain already obscured the high peaks. Patches of fog drifted across nearer slopes while the storm clouds threatened to unleash all the fury Reece had predicted.

They reached the tent and without hesitation, Reece stepped inside. Lily followed and looked up at his injury. "How's your head?"

"It hurts."

"Can I put something on it?"

"I'm all right. I'll wait until I get home.

The sooner we start, the better."

"I'll get a few things," she said.

Chuckling softly, he looked around. "Few is right! You travel lightly, don't you?"

She glanced at the spartan furnishings, her bedroll, camera, knapsack, and neatly folded change of clothes.

Reece chuckled when he saw the cat. "Don't tell me you brought that cat from Iowa!"

She looked down at the striped cat as he opened one baleful yellow eye to gaze back at her. "General Jackson? No, he simply appeared one day about three weeks ago." She raised her head. "I've wondered what I'll do with him when I leave."

"Well, I'm not willing to take him, if that's what you're thinking," Reece said. "I've already got a dog." He turned back to her belongings. "It won't take long to gather this up. When you leave, where will you go?"

"I'll drive to Santiago, get a plane to Miami, where I change flights to Des Moines," she answered while she folded her things and put them inside the bedroll.

"We'll take your jeep now. I rode out this morning on my horse, then went on foot. I'll stop and get him before we drive home."

Within minutes they had taken down her tent and placed her meager possessions packed in the jeep. Reece took her arm and glanced at the dark sky. "Get in. We'll get drenched before long."

As she did, Lily noticed General Jackson, who was now sitting underneath a beech tree. "Wait a minute," she said and jumped out to get the cat.

"My dog will kill him."

"I doubt it," she replied, dumping the cat onto the backseat. She turned to look at the guanaco grazing yards away.

"Forget the guanaco and get in," Reece said, and she climbed in to sit beside

him. "I meant what I said. I have a sheep-dog that's dangerous."

"General Jackson and I will take our chances with your dog and you," Lily stated and met Reece's sardonic gaze.

As they started up the mountain road, she looked back at the spot where the tent had stood, and for an instant she had a strange feeling that she was leaving something behind.

Before long, the wind howled down the slope, buffeting the canvas top of the jeep and whipping in through the open sides to hit Lily and Reece with icy blasts. Looking determined, Reece gripped the steering wheel with strong hands.

After a short time, he left the road, explaining, "My horse is nearby. I'll unsaddle him and let him go. He'll get home before we will." The jeep bounced across the rough terrain toward a black stallion. With quick efficiency, Reece unsaddled the horse, slapped his flank to send the animal racing out of sight, and placed the saddle in the back of the jeep.

Minutes after they returned to the road, the rain began to fall, and they drove along in silence.

Reece suddenly looked intently at her. "How long have you been widowed?"

"Five years."

"What happened to your husband?"

"Bill was a professor of zoology. His office was in the basement of a building that caught fire. They said he tried to save some of his records. He died of smoke inhalation."

"Any children?"

She twisted her gold wedding band. "We had the papers finished and everything ready to adopt a child. After the fire the agency wouldn't agree to let me go ahead with the adoption."

"I'm sorry."

"How long has your wife been gone?"

"Two years." His blue eyes shifted, and he gazed across the field. In a deeper

voice he added, "A tractor turned over and injured Meredith's back. She had four spinal operations during the next three years, and she died during the last operation."

"How terrible. Do you have children?"

His gaze returned to meet Lily's, and the strained note left his tone. "Three boys. Clint, who's twenty, at Harvard. Renner, eighteen, attends Texas A and M, and Dylan, who's sixteen, is in Santiago with his grandparents now."

He gazed silently at Lily, and she knew he felt as terrible about his loss as she did about hers.

As if confirming her guess, he said, "It's tough, isn't it?"

"Yes."

As they approached Reece's house, the storm whipped into greater fury, blowing through the jeep and soaking Lily's jean-clad legs. Through the rain-streaked windshield, she studied the sprawling wooden home with its wide porch. At the front door Reece stopped the jeep, jumped down, and came around to gather Lily's belongings. When General Jackson sprinted to the ground and dashed under the porch, Reece shook his head. "So long, General."

"Wait and see." Ducking her head, Lily dashed through the pouring rain. Cold drops splashed against her cheeks and hands as she ran for the shelter of the porch.

Reece held the door, and she stepped into a hallway. A tempting aroma filled the house, and she glanced at Reece as he took her coat and shed his parka, then hung them on a coatrack by the door. "Something smells good."

"My specialty, mutton stew. I've learned to cook during these last few years. The wife of one of my men cleans for me and cooks part of the time." He took her arm. "Come on. Let's get into dry clothes. I'll show you the bedrooms so you can

shower and change."

He motioned toward a door to enter a long hall. "Bedrooms are here. Mine's at the end of the hall. You can have your choice of the boys' rooms."

She glanced ahead. Two doors opened on the left, one opened on the right. She waved her hand toward the door on the right. "This should be fine."

He grinned. "Farthest from my room."

"I hope so."

"You'd better look at them and take your pick."

She halted at the first door and glanced inside. "This is fine."

Reece's grin widened. "Suit yourself." He strolled down the hall toward his room as Lily entered the bedroom and closed the door. She looked around at the single bed covered in dark brown, a braided rug on the floor, a rocking chair, a small fireplace, shelves of books, and airplane models suspended from the ceiling.

Wondering what lay ahead during the evening, she wandered into the adjoining bathroom, stripped off her clothes, and luxuriated in a hot bath.

Later when she entered the living room, dressed in a white sweater and jeans, a fire was roaring in the fireplace, and Reece was lounging on the sofa. He had changed to a blue wool shirt and jeans. She guessed he'd showered, for his dark hair curled damply against his neck.

He rose and picked up a glass of chilled white wine to hand to her. As he approached his gaze swept over her, and she saw the quick approval in his eyes. Inches away, he stopped and held out the drink. "You're pretty, Mrs. Dunbar."

"Thank you." Accepting the proffered drink, she appraised him with directness, aware of the charged atmosphere between them.

"Want a tour of my house?"

When she nodded, he moved ahead

through an open door. "Here's the dining room. My Welsh ancestors settled here at the turn of the century. The original house is gone. My grandfather started this one; my father and I have both added to it."

"Your parents aren't living?" she asked.

"No."

"Mine aren't either," she stated as they entered the dining room, which looked as masculine as the living room. It was Spanish style, with massive dark wood furniture and a large stone fireplace at one end of the room. Reece motioned toward another door. "Here's where I eat."

They entered a spacious kitchen, which held a round oak table set for two. A cloud of steam rose from an iron kettle on the stove. As she looked at gleaming copper pots and pans on the wall above rust-colored modern appliances, he asked. "You don't have any brothers or sisters?"

She shook her head.

"Is there any man at home, waiting for you?"

She glanced at him. "No. I loved my husband very much and since his death, I've led a busy life. Besides accepting the job of principal, I'm continuing Bill's guanaco studies, I belong to the zoological society at home, and I do volunteer work at the zoo. My own research on guanacos and llamas involves me, and I plan to complete the book Bill started. I lecture, I teach an exercise class, and I make most of my own clothes. I do my own housekeeping, care for the lawn, and have three cats and two dogs."

He raised his eyebrows and smiled wickedly. "That's a hell of a lot of activity. If you have to work that hard to suppress your natural urges, you must be quite a woman!"

For the first time in too long to remember, she felt her cheeks grow faintly warm. She didn't know whether it was

from embarrassment or anger. Determined to retain her composure, she answered flatly, "It combats the loneliness."

"Lily, I was teasing. You don't have to tell me anything about feeling lonely."

She regreted her choice of words, but before she could say so, he asked, "Where's the menagerie while you're here?"

"My sister-in-law keeps them."

They walked back into the living room, and he took her arm. "Dinner's ready, but let's sit down by the fire and finish our drinks."

She crossed the room with him and sat on a sofa. He sat on the edge of the stone hearth a few feet from her and studied her quietly while he sipped his wine.

Suddenly he placed his glass of wine on the hearth, rose, and opened a cabinet to search through records. "Renner sent me some new records last month." As soon as a slow, easy melody filled the room, he turned and said, "Let's dance before dinner."

"I don't mind just sitting by the fire."

He smiled. "I do. I want you in my arms." He reached down to take her glass from her hands, and she was far too conscious of the mere brush of his warm fingers. When she stood, he kicked the rug out of the way, reached out, and slipped his arm around her waist to pull her close.

He was easy to follow, and in a moment Lily relaxed, enjoying the music and the cozy firelight in the room. Her hand rested against his back and through the soft wool of his blue shirt, she could feel his hard shoulder blade. With his jaw only inches away, she detected the faint odor of tangy aftershave.

He pulled back slightly to look her. "This is nice."

She smiled. "I just thought that too. Let's keep it that way."

Instead, the moment changed. His blue

eyes held hers with a silent message impossible to miss. She felt the same charged current pass between them that she'd experienced on the mountain. His gaze shifted to her lips, and his hand tilted her chin while his arm tightened around her waist.

"Reece, there's no room in my life for any involvements, much less a one-night stand while I'm in Chile."

She didn't think he heard a word she said. He leaned down and placed his mouth on hers.

A wave of pent-up longing swept through her. All her logic was denied by her body's instant response, and she was certain he knew it as he wrapped both arms around her and held her closely.

For a moment she felt as if she'd stumbled into a bottomless pit and was falling through a void in a dizzying rush she couldn't stop. Warmth coursed through her; his kiss unleashed sensations she'd held in tight check for a long time.

With a struggle, she collected her wits and pushed against his chest. Without hesitation, he loosened his hold, keeping his hands on her waist as he looked down at her.

She wished the hammer blows of her heart would gentle. "I don't want your kisses," she murmured.

His sardonic lift of an eyebrow told her how much he believed her.

"Reece, there's no place in my life for an affair," she stated emphatically.

"That's not what I want either." His blue eyes denied his words as he gazed at her with an insistent urgency.

She frowned. "If it isn't an affair, what do you want?"

His arms tightened a fraction, and he replied solemnly, "Lily, will you marry me?"

Shocked, she stared at him in stunned silence. Finally, she pushed free and moved away. "Of course not! That's

absurd!"

"It's not at all." He reached out to take her arm. "Come on, we'll discuss it over mutton stew."

"You ask me to marry you and have a bowl of stew! How can you think of mutton when you just dropped a bomb like that proposal?"

He laughed. "I know it's sudden."

She remained immobile, still in shock. What was the matter with the man? "We don't know each other. This is the craziest thing I ever heard in my life! Why would you ask to marry me?"

"I'm damned lonesome here. I need a wife," he answered as if he were explaining how a car motor worked.

"There ought to be women—"

"It isn't a woman I need or miss. It's a wife, an intelligent, committed, attractive female. It's not the same as having a woman around."

Consternation filled her. "You don't know if I'm intelligent, and I'm certainly not committed." She recovered somewhat and smiled wryly. "You've just been alone too long."

"You're damn right!"

He took her arm. "Come on. We'll discuss it over dinner." He led her into the kitchen and held her chair before pouring red wine into both glasses. She studied him while he worked. He looked normal, not at all a crazy type who would come out with such an outlandish proposal. The man was too appealing and charming to have difficulty finding a woman. She sipped the wine while her thoughts reeled.

With quiet efficiency he filled white china serving dishes with steaming stew, corn, and hot bread. When they ate, she was barely conscious of how delicious the stew tasted. All her thoughts were on the broad-shouldered, self-confident male facing her as she listened to him discuss his proposal as calmly as if he were charting a new route home for her.

"What do you have to go home to? You told me you don't have anyone at home waiting for you. Lily, give me a week. You said you don't go to work until November fifteenth. Stay this week and see how you feel about my proposal."

She couldn't believe her ears. She stared at him. The man was unhinged. His lonely life had warped his judgment. Mingling with the shock, she felt a stirring of sympathy. She said, "You don't ask the first person who comes along to marry."

"You're not the first person. You're the first *suitable* person."

Upon seeing his mocking grin, her sympathy evaporated. "Have you ever heard of love?"

"I think that could easily come with a little time and effort."

"And if it didn't?"

"There's no reason it wouldn't."

"There's no lack of arrogance or self-assurance in you!" she snapped.

He laughed. "Would you care for a slice of bread? I baked it myself."

"All your other talents and you bake, too? See, you don't need a wife."

He raised his head and looked into her eyes, and she felt she'd lifted the lid off a blast furnace. His blue eyes held such voracious hunger that she drew a sharp breath. It was easy to guess his thoughts because his passionate longing was so plain. She said, "There should be several local belles who could take care of the physical needs you obviously have."

"I just told you, there's more to it than that. I want a woman who's attractive, fun, intelligent, healthy, and sexy. You fit."

She felt both flattered and dismayed. "Thank you for the compliment, but there are others in the world who'll do as well if not a lot better—"

"I don't have time to find one."

Just when her anger was abating, it

flared again with his statement. "You proposed to me to save yourself the trouble of wife-hunting! How many hours of your busy life have you allocated to this activity?"

"I want that week. If you'll stay—"

"You'll take a week off from the sheep! How far down in your list of priorities is getting a wife? It must come after sheep, the ranch, hunting guanacos..."

"Not really," he answered, grinning.

"Why don't you run an ad in the Santiago paper? It would be just as sensible. You could put all the qualifications you want. This isn't any different."

His eyes twinkled with amusement as he said, "Think of the interviews I'd have to sit through!"

She couldn't resist smiling. He leaned across the table to touch her cheek lightly with his fingertips.

"Are you financially independent?" he asked.

She didn't know whether to laugh or be angry. "Not that it's any of your business, but with my job, I manage just fine."

"I'm wealthy. You'll get along better here."

"With the sheep and guanacos?" she asked and then smiled. "I'm accustomed to living in a city with a stimulating life of college activities."

"The University of Chile is in Santiago. It's a short flight to Vina del Mar, Valparaiso, or Santiago. We can go anytime, and I can afford to do what you want."

She tilted her head and looked up at him. "Does your wealth begin to match your arrogance?"

He shrugged and grinned. "I thought it might relieve you of financial worries."

"My answer is no."

"What do you have to go home for this week? You said your job doesn't start until the fifteenth of November. I'll bet

you're ready for work now. I'd guess you could walk into that school and start as principal tomorrow morning. Do you have to do anything in particular before you go to work?"

For a moment she regretted being so orderly and organized. "No, I'm ready."

"Why can't you wait one week longer?"

"It just doesn't make any sense!"

"You don't have any good argument to present. I know I've surprised you..."

"Reece, it's too ridiculous to consider. What about your sons? Wouldn't they be shocked to find they have a new mother, someone you knew less than six hours when you proposed?"

With maddening calmness he answered, "They're growing up and will have their own lives."

"They might not like me!"

"I'll take that chance. There's no reason they won't."

"I don't know if I want three grown sons."

He tilted his head to one side and let out his breath. "Ah, Lily. You sounded so wistful when you told me about the adoption. I'd guess you'd be delighted with a dozen children—no matter what their ages."

For the first time she realized the full implication of his proposal. She had wanted a family badly. In the early years of her marriage, she and Bill had decided to wait while he got established in his job. Finally, when they wanted children and she hadn't become pregnant, she had gone to a physician. She was fine; it was Bill who couldn't have children. Eventually they decided to adopt. Reece's guess was correct. She looked at him to ask how he felt about more children. Instantly she stopped because she felt as if she were about to fall into the trap he'd set.

Instead, she rose and said, "It's out of

the question for me to stay, and when the rain stops, I'll leave. Go along to Santiago, Reece, and spend more time there. You're attractive. You'll meet someone."

She walked into the living room, but he followed her.

"Come here, Lily," he whispered, and her pulse quickened. She moved as if in a trance, and he reached out and pulled her into his arms to kiss her throat, trailing his warm mouth to a sensitive place behind her ear. "Just give me a week."

Giddy with a chaotic need, she closed her eyes and tilted her head back as his gentle onslaught continued.

He sighed and tightened his arms to crush her against his chest. "I'll kiss you until you consent, Lily Dunbar. That's probably what you need anyway!"

Her protest died in her throat as his mouth possessed hers, exacting the fiery response she couldn't hold back.

Passion shook her as his relentless kiss plundered her mouth, replacing logic with pleasure. He lifted her into his arms and sat down, holding her on his lap while he continued to kiss her. His mouth trailed to her ear; his breath was hot as he whispered, "Give me one damn week!"

She felt dazed, intoxicated; she couldn't think clearly enough to decide if she was on the brink of disaster or rapture. Momentarily, she wondered if he realized he was as vulnerable as she, that he might be hurt.

"Lily," he demanded.

"Yes," she answered, then sighed. The promise was given. She had succumbed to his charm, to his demand.

To her surprise he looked down at her and smiled. "Good. I don't think you'll regret that decision."

"I wonder if you will, Reece," she murmured and slipped her hand behind his neck to tug his mouth down to hers.

She saw the flare of surprise in his blue eyes before he lowered his head to take

her lips.

It was her turn for surprise. His kiss was tender, affectionate more than passionate. And it helped restore her senses. She sat up and looked at him. "What have I done?"

"You promised me a week. It just started." He looked down at the gold watch on his wrist, studying the date as well as the time. Looking at the sweep of the tiny black second hand, she noticed the curly dark hairs on his forearm. He said, "This is Sunday night, October thirty-first. You'll stay until Sunday, November seventh."

In a daze, Lily spent the rest of the evening changing her airline reservation, calling her sister-in-law, and listening to Reece plan the week ahead. After the storm let up, he would personally fly them to Santiago in his private plane. Lily did not really hear the rest of his plans; she was too amazed at her own behavior.

"Take it one day at a time," she told herself.

The next morning Lily was up at dawn and had ham, eggs, biscuits, and hot coffee ready.

She heard a footfall behind her, and strong arms closed around her waist. She whirled to look up at Reece's smiling face. He leaned down to kiss her cheek lightly. "Good morning. Looks as if you saved me the trouble of cooking breakfast." Grinning wickedly, he added, "Or were you anxious to prove your culinary abilities?"

He silenced her protest with a brief kiss before he straightened and released her. Pushing up the sleeves of his dark brown sweater, he said, "It smells delicious, and I'm not about to let it get cold."

She couldn't resist teasing and asked in a sultry voice, "So, my kisses come second to scrambled eggs!"

He turned so quickly it startled her as

he slipped his arm around her waist again. "To hell with the eggs if you'll let me kiss you until I want to stop!" His voice was light, but she sensed a current of seriousness in it.

"Let's eat!" She slipped away from him and poured coffee into white china cups. "Remind me not to tease you any more."

"Lily!"

She paused in surprise at the grave tone in his voice.

"That damn General Jackson has made a jellyfish out of my dangerous, tough sheepdog."

Expecting something entirely different from his announcement, she was so startled for an instant that she didn't say a word. Suddenly laughter bubbled up and made him scowl.

"That dog isn't afraid of predators, foxes, our bull, men, not one damned thing except that one-eyed animal you call a cat!"

"I'm sorry, Reece. He didn't hurt your dog, did he?" She tried to suppress her laughter.

Reece started to speak and clamped his mouth closed. In a few seconds he drew a deep breath and said, "Tiger won't come around the house if that cat is here. He's staying down at the barn."

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

"I just don't understand it. How could that big sheepdog be scared of that rascally old cat?"

"Does that mean you won't keep the cat?"

Thoughtful blue eyes rested on her, and a slow smile appeared. "If I have to keep him to get you, he can chase away every dog on the place."

"Maybe they'll get to be friends," she said with a smile

After breakfast, Reece hurried her to get ready to leave for Santiago.

"What will we do there? I only brought

my jeans and one skirt, so I don't have any fancy clothes. I don't have a dress."

"Wear your skirt. It'll be fine. We'll go to my in-laws' home so you can meet Dylan and his grandparents. I think you'll like them. I'll take them to dinner with us tonight."

An hour later, he helped her into the jeep and climbed in to drive to the small airstrip behind the barns.

Shortly they were airborne, flying above the craggy snow-covered peaks of the *cordillera*. Lily gazed at the land below, fascinated at the aerial view of volcanic craters, deep blue and brilliant emerald lakes surrounded by dark green forests, snowy peaks, and an occasional waterfall with bright rainbows in the fine spume. Gradually the terrain changed, and they reached the fertile valley nearing Santiago. Lily looked down on greening wheat fields, groves of eucalyptus trees, grazing cattle, and winding rivers that snaked across the countryside.

When they landed in the busy airport at Pudahuel, Reece hailed a taxi, and they rode eighteen miles to the sprawling, beautiful Sheraton San Cristobal hotel, where Reece registered for separate rooms and rented a Peugeot. They drove the car east into a suburban area in the foothills of the Andes. Soon Reece turned into a residential area of elegant mansions and well-tended gardens. As he slowed, he said, "This section is called *barrio alto*. We're almost there."

He turned the car through open wrought-iron gates, passing between rock walls to follow a curving drive to the entrance of a two-story gray stone house with a high, peaked roof. Reece held the door while she stepped out and walked with him up broad steps of smooth stone.

At a massive, carved door Reece lifted a heavy brass knocker, and a butler opened the door to greet him. Reece introduced

Lily to the servant. As she nodded, a

cheerful voice sounded.

A woman dressed in gray wool entered the wide hall and crossed to them. "Reece! How good it is to see you. I started to call this morning." Tall, with gray hair, which she wore pulled back in an elegant bun, she leaned forward while Reece kissed her cheek. Lily caught a whiff of a sweet fragrance. Dark brown eyes rested with open curiosity on Lily.

"Lily, this is Meredith's mother, Elise Hale."

"I hear someone familiar," a voice boomed from the end of the long, marbled hall. Wearing a white shirt and black slacks, a man fully as tall as Reece appeared and joined them to shake hands and clasp Reece on the shoulder as his dark eyes rested on Lily with as much curiosity as his wife had shown.

"Lily, this is Charles Hale." Reece held Lily's elbow lightly. "I'd like you two to meet Mrs. Lily Dunbar."

"Welcome to our house, Mrs. Dunbar," Charles said pleasantly.

"Oh, please call me Lily."

"Let's go in the salon and sit down," Elise said. "I'll have Carlotta bring hot tea and coffee." She placed her long fingers on Reece's arm. "I started to call you. Dylan's ill."

"What's wrong?" Reece frowned.

"The doctor sent him to bed because he's running a fever. It's a virus, and Dr. Bueno said he should be better tomorrow."

"I wanted to take the three of you to dinner with us tonight."

Elise smiled and patted his arm. "Thank you, Reece. We couldn't anyway. I'm having a dinner party, and both of you can just stay for it."

Reece laughed. "I know your dinner parties. They're planned down to the last ice cube. Thanks, Elise, but we'll go out to dinner. We won't crash your party."

Both Charles and Elise protested, but

Reece shook his head. "No, not this time, but thank you." He glanced at the broad, curving staircase. "I'll speak to Dylan. I'd like him to meet Lily. If you don't mind, we'll see him first and then be down for coffee."

"Of course, that's fine," Elise said promptly.

Reece took Lily's arm and headed for the sweeping staircase. She said, "Your son may not feel like meeting someone right now."

"I'll find out."

They reached the upstairs hall with its potted palms, marble statuary, and oil paintings. After passing several open doors, Reece motioned to a small blue velvet chair. "If you'll wait, I'll see Dylan alone for a moment."

She nodded and sat down, watching Reece turn the knob and quietly enter the room.

While she sat in the deserted hall, she gazed at the elegant furnishings and wondered what kind of woman Meredith Hale had been. Her ranch home with Reece, with its simple, masculine decor, was so different from the opulence of her parents' home.

In a moment Reece thrust his head into the hall and motioned to her. She rose, and as she stepped to the door, he took her arm. The drapes were pulled, and she entered a dusky bedroom decorated in tones of green. Propped on pillows in bed was a boy who, at first glance, bore no resemblance to his father. Lily looked at Dylan's shock of sandy hair, brown eyes, and rather broad face and wondered if he strongly resembled Meredith.

Dylan's large dark eyes followed her progress toward his bedside. "Lily," Reece said, "this is my son Dylan. Dylan, I want you to meet Mrs. Dunbar."

"I'm glad to meet you, Dylan," Lily said. "I'm sorry you're sick."

"It's not so bad," Dylan said, gazing so

intently at Lily that suddenly she wondered what Reece had told him before she had come into the room. "Dad said you're from the United States."

"That's right. I'm from Des Moines, Iowa."

"I haven't been to Iowa." Dylan's eyelids drooped, and Lily guessed he was struggling to keep from falling asleep while talking to them. Reece squeezed his son's shoulder. "Go to sleep. I'll come back next week and take everyone to dinner."

Dylan gazed up sleepily. "It was nice to meet you, Mrs. Dunbar."

"Thank you, Dylan. I'm glad to meet you, and I hope you feel better soon."

When she finished, Dylan closed his eyes, and she was certain he was asleep. He looked so vulnerable, she thought, with smooth tan skin and a faint flush in his cheeks.

"He's sound asleep," Reece whispered. "We'll go downstairs for coffee."

As they descended the steps, the doorbell chimed, and the butler opened it. A stunning blond in a red linen dress swept into the hall, her glance going straight to Reece.

"Reece, darling! Elise didn't tell me—" Her gaze shifted to Lily, and she paused.

"Elise didn't know we were coming. Althea, this is Lily Dunbar. Lily, meet Althea Bocaja."

"How do you do," Lily said. She was aware of a narrowing of Althea Bocaja's brows and an intense scrutiny. In turn, she felt a shock. Althea Bocaja was extremely attractive, and her greeting of "darling" rang in Lily's ears.

"Come join us for coffee. Elise and Charles are waiting." Reece fell into step between Lily and Althea, and they entered a spacious room filled with antiques and beautiful mahogany furniture. Charles Hale rose to his feet as they

entered, and Elise greeted Althea, who sat down near her.

A silver tray with a pot of hot tea, another pot of coffee, and white china cups and saucers rested on a table in front of Elise, who poured.

Lily sat, listening quietly to the conversation around her. When Althea reached for a cup of steaming coffee, Lily noticed the large diamond rings on her fingers, but within a few minutes Althea mentioned someone named Raoul and added "Welsh and Spanish, a deadly combination. No wonder I'm divorced!" She looked at Reece. "You were so wise to marry someone with your same heritage. I will never understand these hotblooded Chileans!" She laughed. "I should have listened to Mum and gone to school in England, but I didn't want to leave Santiago. Seems ridiculous now."

Elise shrugged. "I don't know. I feel that way about Santiago too." She glanced at Lily and asked, "Have you seen much of our city?"

"Not really, but what I've seen is beautiful."

"I quite agree," Althea said. "I don't know how Reece can stay away from it so long." As the conversation shifted, covering the merits of the city, politics, and Charles's questions about Reece's flocks, it became plain that Althea Bocaja was single and interested in Reece. Each statement was directed to him. She sat facing him and sent continual glances in his direction.

Althea finally turned her attention to Lily. "You look so familiar. Did we meet at the Tagles' party?"

Lily smiled. "No, I've been here only a short time. I'm from the States."

"The United States! How did you meet Reece?"

Lily glanced at him and saw the dancing laughter in his eyes. "I'm in Chile to study guanacos, and I encountered Reece

on his ranch."

"Encountered!" He laughed aloud. "She made a nice part in my hair with her Smith & Wesson!"

Lily met the surprised stares of the others. "As you can see, his hard head survived the blow," she answered coolly and received a chuckle from Reece and Charles.

Althea looked at Reece. "Perhaps I chose a poor time to drop by. I'm interrupting your visit."

"Not at all, Althea," Reece said. "We're going, and you and Elise can talk about what you'll wear to the party tonight."

Immediately Charles and Elise protested, but Reece stood and took Lily's arm and steered her toward the door while he politely but firmly refused their entreaties to stay for the evening.

Elise followed them to the door and raised her cheek for Reece's kiss, then took Lily's hand. "Do come again and stay longer."

The invitation sounded sincere. Lily realized Elise was scrutinizing her intently. Feminine intuition told her that Elise realized the extent of Reece's interest in her. As she thanked her politely, she suspected, too, that Elise would prefer someone from her own class for him.

As Reece drove away from the house, Lily shifted in the car seat, struggling to retain her composure as indignation shook her.

The corner of his mouth lifted in a mocking grin. "I can see the fire flashing in those big gray eyes now. I'm glad your revolver is safely tucked away at the ranch."

"You poor man—you don't know any females."

"I told you, I haven't met anyone suitable."

She felt puzzled and angry. "How could I be more suitable than her? She's

beautiful, far more attractive than I am."

He reached out to trail his fingertip along her jaw. "You're no judge of your attractiveness—or its effect on me. Good lord, Lily, you're beautiful."

A rush of pleasure went through her, mingling with an amused certainty that under no circumstances would she be considered as beautiful as Althea. Along with those feelings, there still remained aggravation that Reece had misled her about the true situation concerning his female acquaintances.

Later they ate lunch at the restaurant in the hotel, then spent the rest of the afternoon in their separate rooms. When Lily first gazed about her elegantly furnished room with floor-to-ceiling white drapes, a thick blue carpet and white French Provincial furniture, she noticed an adjoining door to Reece's room. Then her eyes were drawn to a large glass coffee table which sat in front of an oversized pale blue sofa. A vase of two dozen red and white carnations dominated the table. A white card was tucked into the flowers. Opening the small envelope, she pulled out a card to read a bold scrawl. "Thanks for the week. Love, Reece." She felt half flattered, half angered as she showered and changed her clothes. She was happy to receive the flowers, but the elegant hotel room disturbed her.

When a light rap sounded at five o'clock, she turned to call, "Come in."

With his tie in hand and his coat flung carelessly over his shoulder, Reece entered to stroll across the room toward her, dropping his coat and tie on the first chair he passed.

Trying to ignore her racing pulse, she said, "With that connecting door, we might as well have one room."

"Want me to change the reservation?"

"No! What I'm trying to tell you is that I'm not too happy about this arrangement."

He reached her and slipped his arms around her waist. His voice dropped to a husky note. "It shouldn't matter any more than staying down the hall at my home. All you have to do is say the word, and I'll leave you alone. I don't intend to win you over with force."

"I know what your intentions are."

He kissed her temple, his lips drifting lower to her ear, setting off a shower of sparks inside.

"Thank you for the lovely flowers. Are you trying to soften me up?"

His hands tarried over her hips, while his lips nuzzled her ear. "I don't know. You feel soft enough to me."

She pulled away with a smile. "I think we better head for dinner."

"Whatever the lady wishes," Reece said with a smile.

It was a pleasant evening, so they decided to walk to a restaurant Reece had in mind. In less than fifteen minutes, they arrived. Behind a wall of cracked, fading stucco and decorative wrought iron was a courtyard with fountains and pots of blooming flowers. Reece held open the door to allow her to enter a dimly lit hall. A waiter came forward to greet them. "*Buenas noches*, Senor Wakefield, Senorita."

"*Buenas noches*, Enrique," Reece answered, the melodic language purring from his sensual lips.

Enrique's dark eyes flashed as he smiled at Lily. "*Mesa para dos*," he said in rapid Spanish and led the way through an arched door.

As they crossed smooth, worn cobblestones and skirted a splashing fountain, Lily knew why Reece picked the restaurant. Tables were widely separated, scattered around the courtyard, tucked into niches close to the surrounding rough stone walls. Most of the tables were occupied, but not all. Enrique led them to a secluded corner beside a fountain and

brought them wine.

Over a delicious seafood dinner, Reece asked: "Have you been to the top of San Cristobal hill?"

She shook her head. "No. I haven't spent much time sightseeing in Santiago... or the rest of Chile for that matter."

He sipped his wine. "Valparaiso is beautiful, Vina del Mar has the casinos, and the lake district is like Switzerland. There's Portillo, the summer home for national ski teams. The ski season just ended. Do you ski?"

"No, I haven't ever tried."

"I think you'll like it."

"And you intend to teach me!"

He grinned. "I'd be delighted to teach you anything."

Finishing with a cup of black coffee, Lily declined dessert. She gazed around at the tulips and fountains, the worn cobblestones, wondering if she would eat here again or if it would be just a memory when she returned to Iowa. "What a wonderful dinner," she exclaimed.

As Reece smiled, his blue eyes radiated pleasure. "Santiago has some excellent, fancy restaurants, but this is my favorite. I discovered it about a year ago, and I eat here whenever I get the chance." He added solemnly, "One more thing we have in common."

She looked into the blue depths of his eyes, his dark lashes a shadowy fringe. The one thing they had most in common was that passionate, vibrating attraction between them. She felt it jump to life and knew he did too as his eyelids lowered a fraction.

"Are you ready to leave?"

She nodded and when they stepped outside, he took her arm to stroll until he hailed a taxi.

Darkness had descended while they were eating. Lily rode in the backseat of the taxi, sitting next to Reece. He held her

hand while he pointed out sights they passed. She found it increasingly difficult to keep her attention on Santiago's buildings rather than the man at her side.

Once they were at the hotel Lily was certain Reece would stop in her room. Instead, he motioned toward his door with a wave of his hand. "Come have a drink. You can leave whenever you'd like."

"Fine," she answered and waited while he unlocked his door. Expecting to find a room similar to hers, she was surprised to discover that Reece had a suite of rooms. She entered an elegant sitting room, which had thick pale blue carpeting and white decor.

Reece walked to the built-in bar and fixed them a drink. "Have some *aguardiente*, Chilean brandy."

Lily raised the brandy to her lips and drank. The liquid changed to flame as it went down her throat. She coughed slightly and glanced at him. "I've heard about *aguardiente*, but this is the first I've tasted."

"It's a little fiery." Placing his glass on a table, Reece reached into his pocket and produced a bit of white tissue paper. "Hold out your hand."

She did as he asked and watched while he unwrapped a gold chain bracelet and fastened it around her small wrist.

The tiny golden links gleamed dully in the semidarkness. She touched it lightly with her other hand. "Reece, it's lovely!"

He frowned, his big fingers fumbling with the catch momentarily. When it was secured, he raised his head, and she was riveted by blue eyes again.

A warmth, deep within, started rising, swelling and spreading through her, making her tremble. As if pulled by an unseen force, she felt like drawing closer to him.

He leaned forward to possess her mouth. At the first brush of his warm lips, she felt her reluctance begin to dissolve like ice beneath a desert sun. Desire surged

ed along her veins and made her sway toward him. She returned his kiss with a golden fire of her own.

After a moment she shifted away slightly. When she did, he asked, "Doesn't this feel right?"

It did. It felt right, inevitable, perfect. In the dark shadows of the room, she gazed up at him. The flat planes of his face showed clearly. He stepped closer, menacing yet tantalizing at the same time. This dark, tall man was invading every corner of her heart and soul and body.

With all the steely determination that had carried her through critical moments during the past few years, she ignored her pounding heart, her feminine yearning for him, and started toward the door. "It's been a marvelous evening, and I know you so much better—let's leave it at that."

He was beside her instantly, his long arm slipping around her waist to pull her back.

He held her tightly, and she felt hard arms that threatened her peace. "You wouldn't use force."

"Of course not," he replied as he bent down to kiss behind her ear. His breath was warm, his lips moist on her sensitive skin. One hand pressed the small of her back, propelling her gently to his muscular frame, while his other hand slid beneath her sweater, following the curve of her full breast. Lily gasped, a scorching current flamed through her. Reece's voice dropped to a deep huskiness. He whispered in her ear, "Go on. I'm not holding you with force."

Her traitorous body took charge, overriding cool wisdom or will or restraint, and Reece knew it as well as she did.

"You have to stop!" she insisted, but the protest was a token, faint and useless against his masterful determination. Relentlessly he trailed kisses along her throat. His hands found the small white

buttons of her blouse, unfastened them deftly, and slipped the blouse off her shoulders.

She was allowing him to undress her, to make love to her, and each act bound her like a link in the bracelet. Every light caress, every fiery kiss forged another link in an invisible chain that could imprison her heart.

His breath went out in a rush. "You're so damned beautiful." His gaze drank in her smooth skin, her full curves, while his voice held a note of awe that stirred her as much as his touch. She felt incredibly young; it seemed so good to have Reece look at her as if she were the most precious thing on earth.

"Touch me, Lily," he commanded, his sensual tones arousing her further.

"No." How difficult to refuse! "I'll never be able to think straight if I let you make love to me." An inner voice urged flight; every heartbeat throbbed with a different wish.

A lazy, confident smile played across his face as he shook his head. "That cool, logical part of you is outnumbered. There's a warm, passionate part that wants exactly what I do. I hear it in your voice in spite of your words. Let yourself go, honey."

His husky voice set a torch to her blood. "I want to undress you. I want to remove your clothes and with them your hesitation, your doubts. I don't want any barrier between us, not lace, not uncertainty."

The deep note of sincerity in his voice shook her. Dimly she felt his hands drop so that he could unbutton her skirt, which whispered to the floor. Then he pulled away the last silken barriers of her underclothes and stockings. "Do you know what you're doing to me?" she whispered. "I told you, I can't take sex lightly."

"I never intended you to take this light-

ly." He didn't whisper. His voice was firm and deep, mildly startling in the quiet room as he lifted her gently, walked into the bedroom, and placed her on the bed.

Her heart thudded against her ribs. She watched as he tugged his shirt free, unbuttoning it and dropping it to the floor. Within seconds he'd unfastened his belt buckle and shed the rest of his clothes. Keys, change, the buckle, dropped with a jingle, and in the breathless silence that followed, Lily gazed avidly at his trim, hard male body that was honed to tough fitness by years of rough ranchwork. Curly, dark hairs covered his bronzed chest and forearms. He stripped off his gold watch and placed it on a table beside the bed.

He gazed down at her as unself-consciously and naturally as if he were fully clothed. All his attention focused on her. He stretched out on the bed on his side, drawing her to him. She discovered the joy of being loved by a mature man. It was so different from the impetuous youth she had married so long ago.

His control gave her a special gift, made his lovemaking leisurely, full of consideration for her. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her alongside him, flesh against flesh. She lost all hesitancy, any lingering shyness. He made her want him with every fiber and every pore. His dizzying caresses flooded her with torment. Long past the point of reason or hesitation, she hungered for more. Enveloped in a caldron of steaming sensations, she needed all of him, yearned for him desperately. Years fell away, her defenses dissolved in the heat of passion. Restraint went down like rain.

"Reece, please..."

"Ahhh," He exhaled a long sigh of pure satisfaction, and she realized he had been waiting until she said she wanted him, holding back while his consummate lovemaking drove her to feel an over-

powering need.

He placed her hand over his heart. "Feel that. Do you know what it's cost me to hold back, to wait until you said you wanted me?"

She felt the crisp hairs beneath her palm, his warm flesh and the thudding hammer blows of his heart. Each pounding beat was for her, because of her.

In scorching agony she twisted to raise her lips to his again. She wanted him, and it seemed as natural as breathing when they finally joined together.

She came back to earth a bit at a time. Gradually her heartbeat returned to normal. She became aware of the heat radiating from his body. His arms held her tightly; one hard leg was flung over hers.

As they lay in the darkened room, he said quietly, "I love you, Lily."

Secure in his arms, she drifted off to sleep.

Later, when she opened her eyes, she gazed into the early morning light, blinked, and remembered the past hours. She shifted to study Reece.

His thick, dark lashes lay against his prominent cheekbones. A faint stubble of whiskers covered his jaw. She gazed at his mouth, his slightly full underlip that hinted at the sensual side to his nature. A stir of longing raked through her. Frowning, she gazed at the ceiling. The damage was done, and there was no going back. Reece had destroyed all the control she had carefully built and preserved over the years.

Carefully she extricated herself from his arms, rose, and slipped on her bra and white lace panties. Without a sound she walked to the door, but Reece sensed her absence and woke. "Oh, Lord, where are you going?"

She paused. "I'm going to bolt my door, shower, dress, and I'll see you next in the coffee shop downstairs."

The corner of his mouth lifted in a mocking grin. "Yes, ma'am. Sure you don't want your back scrubbed when you shower?"

"No!" She rushed across the sitting room into her room and locked the door.

An hour later as she sat over her third cup of coffee, she was in as much turmoil as ever. She didn't know what she felt for Reece, how deep her feelings went, or how good her judgment was at this point. She glanced up as he stepped through the open door to the coffee shop.

That quick charge sparked inside her and polarized as his blue eyes swung to meet her. She felt something inside like a tiny explosion of joy. Dressed in a suit and white shirt, he looked urbane and commanding. It was almost impossible to think that only a couple of hours earlier she had lain naked in his arms.

He started threading his way toward her. A smattering of people filled the room, which held tables covered in white cloths. People sat at a counter, and the jingle of a cash register sounded every few minutes.

"Hi, beautiful, can I sit down here?"

She laughed. "Reece, don't cause a scene."

He pulled out a chair and sat down facing her. His amusement faded. "I just received a call from the ranch. I need to get home. I have trouble, some sick sheep."

"I'm sorry. Is it serious?"

He shrugged. "I don't know until I get there." He glanced at the approaching waitress.

Reece ordered, they ate, and as soon as they finished, they checked out of the hotel and drove to the airport to return to the ranch.

Reece had ridden away on horseback, saying he wouldn't be back until the next day. As Lily sat curled on the sofa in front

of the fire, studying her guanaco notes, she heard the sound of a car motor approaching. The rumble grew until it reached the drive beside the house.

Setting aside her notes, she rose and looked out the window to see headlights. Regretting her decision to get ready for bed early, she glanced down at her heavy nightgown and a blue terry robe borrowed from Dylan's closet.

The car halted beside the house. It was too late to change into any other clothes. As Lily reached the kitchen, a key turned in the lock and the door swung open. Cold air struck her as she stood in the center of the kitchen and watched a young man step inside. He closed the door, turned, and she knew immediately how Reece had looked twenty years ago.

This son had the same dark, curly hair and slightly stubborn jaw, the same blue eyes, only these were stormy with anger. He was broad-shouldered and lean to the point of looking underfed.

"You're Clint, aren't you?" she asked.

His blue eyes narrowed, and her suspicion about the anger in his eyes was confirmed by the tone of his voice. "Yes. Mrs. Dunbar." He studied her insolently, taking in the robe and nightgown, her stockinged feet.

Pulling the collar of the robe closed beneath her chin, she felt defensive and wished again she had remained dressed. She sighed. "How do you know who I am?"

His eyes were glacial as they met hers. "Dylan called me. Where's Dad?"

"He's not here, and he said he probably won't be back tonight. Some sheep are sick, and he left to see about them. Have you eaten?"

"No, but I'll take care of myself."

She smiled. "There's a little of your father's mutton stew in the refrigerator. I'll heat it."

"Don't bother, Mrs. Dunbar."

She followed him into the kitchen, sat down at the table and watched him heat up the stew. As he carried his dish to the table, she asked, "Did Dylan call and tell you he met me?"

Placing the stew on the table, he sat down across the table from her.

"Dad told Dylan he's going to marry you."

The words sent anger and shock through Lily. How typical of Reece and his directness, his self-confidence. Why hadn't he waited to spring that news on his family until he was certain! And why hadn't he warned her that he'd told Dylan? No wonder Dylan's dark eyes had studied her so intently! She frowned, her anger increasing as she realized the problems Reece had caused by his arrogant assumption that she would accept his proposal. Now she had to deal with Clint's fury.

She tried to keep her temper under control. "Clint, your father proposed to me. I haven't accepted."

The stabbing glance showed how little he believed her statement. Silence lengthened between them.

"You want to know where I met your father, don't you?" Lily asked quietly.

He sat back in the chair and regarded her with open hostility. "Yes, ma'am. And I'd like to know when. It wasn't too long ago I left to go to school, and I don't recall ever hearing your name mentioned."

Here it comes, she thought, bracing for the reaction from him.

"I'm in Chile to study guanacos. I met your father when I was camping. A storm was brewing, and he invited me to stay here."

"How long had Dad known you when he proposed?"

This angry young man wouldn't understand. "I think you'd better ask your dad about that."

He swore roughly and stood, pacing

the kitchen. "Dad's been lonely as hell since my mother's death. He's a sitting duck for this! You just happened to come to our ranch to study guanacos, thousands of miles from your home; staying on our land where one of the wealthiest men in Chile lives, an eligible widower..."

"You've made your point."

"You're marrying him for his money, aren't you?"

It took a strong effort to hold her temper. "Will it matter to you how I answer?"

Ignoring her question, his voice grated as he said, "I can't stop my father if he's decided to marry you, but I want to warn you, don't mess up his life. Don't marry him and expect to take him for what you can get. I promise you, one way or another, I'll make you sorry if you do!"

"I'll remember that."

Her quiet words added to his anger. He sucked in his breath and walked over to grasp her arm roughly. "I mean it, Mrs. Dunbar."

She turned her head and looked pointedly at his fingers squeezing her arm.

He dropped his hand. In a firm voice she said coldly, "Don't do that again, Clint."

"My father is lonely, and it's warped his judgment. Or you have. If you marry him, just remember he has three sons who still live under the same roof with him."

There was nothing to be gained in arguing with him, and she could understand his attitude. She knew now she couldn't marry Reece. His son had broken the spell woven by Reece's seductive charm. It had been ridiculous to give the proposal serious consideration.

In spite of her decision, she didn't intend to give Clint the satisfaction of knowing it yet. While he had succeeded in driving her away, he'd never understand it wasn't his threats or anger, but merely his

presence that had restored her common sense.

She stood and said, "You've made your point, Clint. If you'll move out of my way, I'll clean the kitchen."

He made a derisive sound and stomped out of the room. She gazed after him and felt desolation sweep through her. Realization came that she should leave now. It was a long drive to Santiago. Why wait to combat Reece's arguments, his implacable personality, his charm? She should leave before he came back. The more she gave the idea thought, the more appeal it held. She moved quickly, going to her room and collecting her things. Finally she sat down to write a note to Reece.

She gazed into space, composing her thoughts before she wrote carefully:

Dear Reece,

I've had time to think quietly and review my needs. I've decided it's best I return home. Clint arrived tonight, and I feel doubly certain now.

Thank you for everything. I hope you find happiness.

My love, Lily

She gazed at the words. It shouldn't hurt so badly to go, but it did. She slipped the note into an envelope, sealed it, and wrote Reece's name in large letters across the front.

At the airport the next afternoon Lily looked at her watch. In five minutes she could board her flight to Miami. She turned the gold bracelet, the chain that Reece had fastened on her wrist. As she remembered the moment, something inside wrenched painfully.

Over the address system came a loud voice. "Will the owner of a cat that answers to the name General Jackson,

please come to the LAN Chile desk?"

Lily stiffened in shock. Several people around her laughed. She couldn't believe what she'd heard. How on earth could that cat be at the airport? How would they know the cat's name? As quickly as she wondered, she knew. Reece. Her heart began to pound as the announcement came again.

She stepped out of the line, aware of several people watching her with curiosity. At that moment came a repeated announcement that they were now boarding flight 267.

Quickening her pace, her heels clicking with each step, she hurried toward the front of the airport, passing people walking toward the waiting plane.

In the center of the busy lobby, she spotted Reece leaning casually against the counter, one hand on General Jackson. The cat looked as angry as Reece looked relaxed.

Something seemed to burst inside as she met his stormy gaze. Her blood pounded in her ears, and she lost all awareness of the people milling about.

Reminding herself to remain firm in her purpose, she steeled herself for a confrontation. When she reached him, she saw the ice in his blue eyes. "How did you get here so quickly?" she asked.

"I flew."

"Of course. I forgot about your plane. Reece, I'm sorry, but Clint made me see things in a clearer light. I tried to explain in my note."

He continued to lounge against the counter. Only the glacial blue in his eyes betrayed any emotion. "You gave me your word."

The despair she had experienced all the previous night and this day deepened. "I know."

He gazed at her with an impassive expression as he remained nonchalantly leaning against the counter. He asked

softly, "What are you going to do with General Jackson?"

She blinked in surprise. "You'll keep him, won't you?" Suddenly it dawned on her what his answer would be, why the cat was with him.

"This is your cat," he replied coolly. "Are you taking him on board with you?"

Remorse changed to dismay and anger. "You know it would take a week to get through the red tape to get that cat on a plane! I have to go. Please take him to the ranch."

In the softest voice he answered, "If you take three steps away from here, I'll remove my hand from General Jackson, and he's on his own."

"That's blackmail!"

Reece shrugged his shoulder casually. "Not much worse than breaking a promise, I'd say."

Out of the corner of her eye she was aware that more than one clerk had gathered to listen to the exchange. A few people paused nearby, some casting surreptitious glances at them, others staring openly. When General Jackson meowed woefully, someone snickered.

Lily detected a wicked gleam in Reece's eyes, and her anger grew. "Clint made me think clearly."

"Oh, hell, Lily. The kid's just in shock. I told Dylan I might marry you—"

"That was a little premature, don't you think!"

"I'm sorry. I should have called Clint and Renner too. Somehow, I forgot after we reached the hotel."

She faced resolute blue eyes. "Reece, I have my ticket to get on board a plane leaving in a few minutes! You can't be so cruel as to turn that cat loose in this airport. You know he'd be lost and homeless."

"That would be a damn shame, Lily," he drawled. "I'd hate to see General

Jackson shivering in the street at night, dodging cars, going hungry, sleeping in the rain."

"Reece Wakefield! You can take that cat home with you! I only have two more minutes."

"I want my week."

"Clint doesn't like me."

"I do and I count more."

In a low voice she said, "There are moments when you can be so aggravating!"

"What did you say, Lily?"

She knew he heard every word. The chill in his blue eyes changed to dancing amusement, and she guessed he was certain he'd won and was enjoying himself. No doubt her plane was headed down the runway by now.

In a loud, clear voice she said, "You're arrogant! *Eres muy testaduro y agravante!*"

Several people laughed. She heard words in Spanish she couldn't translate. In sympathy with her someone said, "*Muy bien dicho, senora!*"

Reece smiled. "I also want to marry you."

Lily's anger began to fade. She laughed. "You're hopeless!"

The crowd broke up with laughter and suggestions to Reece as he led her away to the airstrip where his plane was waiting.

When they had boarded the plane and were at last moving down the runway, Reece glanced down at General Jackson, who was nestled in Lily's arms.

"That cat's come in handy after all," he smiled.

When they landed at the ranch, Reece helped Lily down, and said, "If you'll wait, it'll only take a minute or two to tie down the plane." He began to work quickly.

She realized that he wanted to protect her from encountering Clint alone. She

shook her head. "I'll go inside."

He straightened. "Wait a second. I'll come back and finish this."

"No, do it now. I don't mind, really."

His blue eyes peered intently at her a moment, and she saw the concern in them. "I'll be all right."

Picking her way through the darkness, she strolled toward the house. When she entered the warm kitchen, Clint was standing at the sink, washing his hands. The odor of burned meat filled the air, and a blackened skillet sat on the stove. Dressed in faded jeans and a blue sweater, Clint turned, and she looked into another pair of deep blue eyes. With a calm she didn't feel, she said, "I'm back, Clint. Your father persuaded me to stay the rest of the week."

He gave her another quick, assessing glance. Leaning against the counter, he crossed his arms over his chest, but to her surprise the angry resentment didn't show in his features. Nor in his voice as he said, "I thought he would."

He shifted his feet and looked vaguely uncomfortable, but his gaze was unwavering. "Mrs. Dunbar, my father talked to me this morning and told me how you met and when he proposed." Clint looked down a second and shifted his weight again.

"I know how tough and stubborn my father can be." He raised his head. "I guess I owe you an apology."

Lily's breath went out in a long sigh, and she realized how braced she'd been to face another of Clint's angry attacks. Amazed at the change, she smiled. "That's all right. I think your feelings are normal and quite understandable."

"I wasn't very nice."

"Let's forget it." Suddenly she realized he was studying her intently, and she was certain there was something else on his mind.

She waited, but he remained silent. At

that moment the door opened, and Reece entered with her luggage. He frowned and glanced quickly at Lily before he greeted Clint. "Did the kitchen catch on fire?"

"No, just my dinner," Clint answered.

"Take out some steaks and you can join us."

Lily took one of her bags from Reece and they walked out of the room. When they reached the end of the hallway, she said softly, "Clint apologized to me."

"That's good. I told you he'd come around. He will even more when he gets to know you." She heard the relief in his voice.

"What did you say to him?"

Reece answered offhandedly. "I just told him how we met and when I proposed."

"He keeps looking at me as if there's something he wants to ask or as if he can't figure me out. It isn't because of what you said to him, is it?"

Reece's blue eyes were wide and unconcerned. "I doubt it, Lily." He opened the door to her room, and she entered.

After he put down her luggage he moved near to kiss her, then stepped away reluctantly. "I guess I should fling the steaks on to cook."

"I'll change and be down in a minute."

The devilish twinkle appeared in his blue eyes. "Want some help?" he asked softly.

"No!"

Chuckling, he reached out to place his hand against her cheek. Laughter faded from his eyes, and he regarded her soberly. "I'm glad you're here, Lily."

After he left she showered, dried her hair, and dressed in jeans and a pale blue sweater. After unpacking her luggage and putting her things away, she went downstairs and found Reece and Clint working over dinner.

The tantalizing aroma of sizzling steaks and hot coffee filled the kitchen. "Can I

help?" she asked.

"Clint and I have everything under control. There's your glass of wine."

She sat down at the table and picked up a glass of chilled red wine to sip while both men finished getting dinner on the table.

All through a delicious meal of tender juicy steaks and fluffy potatoes, buttered carrots and bread, she caught speculative glances from Clint. When the meal was over and they rose from the table, Reece said, "Clint and I'll clean."

Lily took his arm. "Oh, no. I insist. Go sit down in front of the fire and forget the kitchen."

Reece picked up his cup of coffee and left. Lily glanced at Clint and said, "Go on. I'll do these."

"No, I'll help."

Lily carried dishes to the sink and began to rinse while Clint cleared the table. As he set plates on the counter, he paused. She glanced up to find him studying her again.

He tilted his head to one side, and she discovered the reason for his curiosity as he asked, "Did you really shoot my father?"

What had Reece told him? she wondered.

"Well, yes. . ."

Clint's eyes widened. "He said you did!"

"I said you did what?" Reece asked from the doorway as he entered the room to return his empty cup.

Lily blushed, wondering if she would ever hear the last about that shooting. "Did you tell Clint I shot you accidentally?"

"Or missed accidentally." Reece's blue eyes twinkled.

"I didn't intend to hit you, and you know it!" She explained to Clint, "Your father was going to shoot a guanaco, and I couldn't bear to see one killed. I didn't know any other way to get his attention

quickly—”

“You made me notice you, all right!”

Emphatically she finished, “I didn’t mean to wound him.”

While she talked with Clint, Reece quietly helped with the dishes, and soon they were finished. Lily declined anything to drink, and both men opened bottles of cold Escudo. Reece put his arm around Lily’s shoulder to stroll into the living room. When Clint started down the hall toward his room, Reece said, “Come join us.”

After a slight hesitation, Clint returned and sank into a large leather chair, draping one leg over the arm.

During the next hour, they chatted, and Lily realized Clint had some of his father’s charm. When he finally excused himself and left to study, she turned to Reece, who was sitting on the sofa, his long legs stretched in front of the fire. A log fell, sending a shower of bright orange sparks up the chimney as flames curled and licked around the thick, brown wood.

Lily said, “He’s like you.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“Both.”

Reece laughed softly and patted the sofa. “Come over here.”

“Not on your life. We have a chaperon, remember?”

With his booted feet planted widely apart, he leaned forward and placed his elbows on his knees. “Well, if you won’t let me kiss you, shall we start packing and getting things together for tomorrow? I want to take you to Torres de Paine Park. You can take care of the food while I get out the equipment.”

“That’s fine, but I want two tents and two sleeping bags.”

“You won’t need a tent or sleeping bag. I have a trailer.”

“With one bed?”

He smiled. “No. We used to take the boys camping. You can sleep twelve feet

away from me if you want.”

“That’s so reassuring!”

He laughed, rose to his feet, and picked up the empty beer bottle. “Want to help?”

“Sure, if I can. I don’t know where you keep everything.”

“Just rummage around. You’ll find enough food. Make some sandwiches and we’ll eat on the way. The refrigerator in the trailer holds plenty.”

For an hour they worked. Lily discovered the kitchen was orderly and it was easy to find the food and utensils they needed. Reece pulled on his black parka and left for the garage to return shortly and park by the kitchen door.

He entered with a cold gust of wind. “Get your coat and come look at the trailer.”

She dried her hands and went to get the sheepskin coat. Outside, a porch light shed a yellow glow over a red pickup truck and a white eighteen-foot trailer.

She stepped inside and looked at dark brown mahogany veneer walls and russet carpeting. There were two convertible gaucho couches, a propane-butane range and sink on her left, and opposite the range, a refrigerator. At the back were a bathroom and closet. She said, “After a tent this looks like total luxury.”

“It’s comfortable. Do you have any food ready?”

“Yes.” Together they returned to the kitchen and in a few trips loaded the trailer.

When they finished, they hung their coats in the kitchen. Reece switched off a light and draped his arm around her. Together they walked through the silent house to Lily’s room. He stepped inside with her and closed the door quietly behind them.

Before she could protest he said, “I’m going to leave in a second. I just wanted to tell you good night.” He tilted her chin up

a fraction, and the touch of his warm fingers sent a wild current through her. "I'll see you at five in the morning. Night, honey."

He left quietly, and she gazed at the door as Reece pulled it shut behind him. She was surprised he hadn't kissed her; she had expected him to, and, she realized, she had wanted him to.

In the early hours of Thursday morning, Lily rose, dressed, and joined Reece to tell Clint goodbye, then they were on their way.

It was a long, rugged drive through Chilean Patagonia. Reece drove with the competence she had expected, and she knew they covered the distance in as little time as possible.

Before sundown she had her first glimpse of the Paine Cordillera. Reece braked, and they looked ahead. Purple in the distance, the rocky extrusions had an awesome grandeur. The rugged outline was unique, sharp peaks etched against the sky, and she knew it would be unforgettable.

Overwhelmed, she gazed in silence for a moment before she said, "I'm so glad you brought me to see this."

"It's impressive, isn't it?"

She turned to look at him and found him studying her intently. He said quietly, "You see, Lily, I don't know any other woman who would've liked this."

"I think you're wrong." She looked at the mountains again. "They're magnificent!" He put the truck in gear, and it bounced over the rough road. In the last light of day, he found a campsite at the base of the mountains.

She stepped outside to breathe cold, fresh air. To the north of the trailer spread a forest of beech trees, and their sweet, woody scent filled the air. Ahead of the trailer, dark and majestic, the mountains towered over them. She strolled around

the trailer, damp, brown leaves and twigs rustling softly with her steps. Coming down from the mountains, a stream gurgled nearby.

Suddenly she heard the click of a rifle bolt. She turned and saw Reece raise a Browning to his shoulder to aim across the stream as Lily glimpsed the red-gold fur of a fox darting between the trees.

"Reece!" she shouted, dashing toward him. "You can't shoot that animal!"

Lowering his rifle, his head jerked around. "Lily, it's not a guanaco; it's a fox. He's a predator, dammit!" He raised the rifle and turned to aim.

"Reece!"

His blue eyes met hers and locked in an unrelenting gaze.

She lowered her voice. "I'm sorry, but I just can't stand killing. It's murderous, even if it's only an... an animal."

Suddenly she was filled with anguish. In that second she saw the hopelessness of the opposition between them. This hard, implacable man was born to hunt. He lived a primitive life on the rugged, isolated ranch. He was a philistine; his ancestors hunted to survive. Killing was as ingrained in his nature as eating, drinking, and sleeping.

"I'm sorry, Reece," she said quietly. "It's too important to me."

Reluctantly he lowered the rifle, running his hand across the back of his neck without taking his eyes from her.

"Lily, I've hunted since I was nine years old."

Wordlessly she turned and entered the trailer. After a moment she glanced outside and saw him walking away through the trees, rifle in hand. She wondered if he would kill an animal anyway. A shudder went through her, and a great sense of loss enveloped her.

Numbly she worked over dinner. The door to the trailer finally clicked, and Reece entered. Her heart hurt to notice

the deep creases that bracketed his mouth. He looked so tired. She remembered that they had been up since before dawn and he had driven hard over rough roads for long hours. Added to that was the turmoil of the past hour.

"How can we work this out?"

She gazed up at him warily, unable to imagine that he would give up hunting, barely daring to hope that he would.

"I don't know how we can compromise. Killing is killing."

He tilted his head to one side slightly and regarded her silently. She began to wonder how long they would face each other without talking and what was going through his mind. Finally he asked, "Lily, would it be acceptable if I agreed to put away the guns when you're present?"

She drew a long breath, realizing this arrogant, proud man was willing to make a concession.

"Clint will dislike me even more if he discovers I've changed your life-style that much."

Reece shook his head. "Not when he sees how much happier I am with you."

Hope flowered inside her with his last words.

"I guess I can go along with that."

She saw the relief sweep through him and wondered if what he was feeling could in any way match what she was experiencing.

Setting the rifle down carefully, he crossed the short distance to pull her close, and she closed her eyes, listening to the steady beat of his heart. She felt relief, but along with it was a certainty that she should go home, back to Iowa before she gave him a final decision.

After a few minutes, she moved away. "Dinner will get cold. Are you ready to eat?"

He nodded and went to wash up. All through dinner, their conversation was pleasant, inconsequential, but she felt

tense because she knew she had to tell him that she was going home.

He appeared relaxed, but she noticed a steady watchfulness. He didn't try to make love to her, but merely kissed her good night and moved to a bunk in the front of the trailer.

Long after she had undressed in the narrow bathroom and slipped between covers, she lay awake. She could see Reece's profile outlined against the window and knew he was sitting up on the couch below the bunk, gazing out.

She started to speak to him but bit her lip and remained quiet. She dreaded telling him that she had to go, but she knew she couldn't accept his proposal until she viewed it calmly at home in her own element. Essentially she was a country girl from Iowa. She knew if she told him, he would say he was a country boy too—but were they the same?

He seemed in better spirits the next day. They rose early, ate, and spent the day climbing the mountains.

There never seemed to be a good moment to tell him her decision. At the end of the day, they returned to the trailer. In the last fading light of day, Reece built a roaring fire, piling up brush and logs until orange flames leaped in the air. She watched him work, his lithe movements indicating his fitness and vitality.

He straightened and brushed his hands against his jeans.

"You've been unusually quiet."

Resolutely she steeled herself for a confrontation. She had to go home to think things through. Meeting the warmth in his blue eyes, she felt a tightening inside.

"I have to go home," she said.

Her heart began to thud at the visible shock in his eyes. A shuttered look came over his face, and her heart wrenched because she knew she was the cause of his anguish. His pain was so intense, she was

tempted to relent, to forget her resolution.

"Does that mean your answer is no?" His voice was flat, hiding any emotion.

She shook her head. "No. I just need to look at this in the proper perspective. I have to go home and think about your proposal."

"You're damn careful."

"I want to go home and see if I feel the same about you when I'm in Iowa." She waved her hand. "This is magical; it's awesome and not quite real to me. Reece, I can't go through another heartbreak. I have to be very sure."

"All right, Lily." His eyes darkened, and his voice was deep. "I love you, so I'll let you go. We'll start back at dawn."

How final that sounded. Regret and desolation swept her, but she fought against them. She struggled with an unreasonable panic at the thought of leaving him, but she had to go home before she gave an answer to something that would change her life drastically and irrevocably.

She kissed him goodbye the next evening at Santiago's airport. The jet climbed above the clouds, and Chile was lost from view.

All the long flight to Miami and on to Des Moines, she was filled with weariness, longing, and a sense of desolation. On a chilly November night, she entered a stuffy house. As she went through the rooms, turning on lights, she ached for Reece, for his strong arms, his quick laugh, but she knew she had to wait and see if she still felt that way when she was back in her orderly routine. She phoned her sister-in-law and made arrangements to pick up her pets the next day.

On her second day home, she had visited her sister-in-law and returned to her house with two beagles, one yellow tabby and two silver-tipped Persian cats. Just

after she had fed them, the doorbell rang. Lily answered it to face a delivery man with a huge box that contained a dozen red roses. The note inside said: "I miss you." Reece.

Still she waited. She felt she would never know for certain until she was in the routine of work. After she began her new job, it took two more days, and she knew she had waited all that would ever be necessary.

She wanted to marry Reece. Her heart was his, totally, absolutely.

When she returned home Tuesday, she made her decision. As soon as she reached home, she rushed to the telephone to call Reece. With the receiver at her ear, she paused. A sudden cold thought hit her that maybe after she had left, he might have changed his mind.

Slowly she lowered the receiver and studied it, debating about calling. Finally she rose and pulled out her box of stationery to write instead. If anything had happened to make him change his mind, it would be easier for him to handle.

She went to the kitchen table and sat down with her cream-colored stationery in front of her. She felt her fingers tremble with eagerness. Now that she had made the decision, there was no doubt, no lingering question in her mind about anything.

She wrote, "Dear Reece: Yes! I can't wait! I love you, Lily."

She sealed it and yanked on her coat to rush to the post office. It had closed for the day, but she dropped it in the box outside. She felt like singing for joy. She returned home, too excited to eat, and forced her thoughts to making arrangements to quit her job.

She decided to wait until she heard from Reece. The moment he received the letter, she expected him to call, and then she would notify the board of her decision.

She looked down at the two beagles at her feet. Laughing, she knelt to pet them. "South America for you, chums!" she said and watched their tails wag happily as she scratched their ears.

In a daze of joy, she tried to concentrate on her job during Wednesday. The pressures of school kept her mind occupied, but she found it increasingly difficult to work efficiently. She forgot papers and left them in teachers' classrooms, she was late for an appointment, and she missed lunch. Appalled when she finally realized how uncharacteristic those actions were, she knew she had better hear from Reece soon.

She faced Thursday, determined to keep her wits about her because it was an all-important day. Thursday evening was the annual school open house and parent-teacher meeting. Lily would be introduced to parents. She knew she couldn't announce her resignation until she had notified the board, so she would just have to go through with the open house.

By Thursday evening, her nerves were frazzled. After eating a hasty dinner and feeding the animals, she dressed quickly and rushed to the meeting.

When she stepped outside, the first cold white flakes of winter were drifting silently to earth. She scraped the windshield of her car, climbed inside, and as she drove to school, rehearsed what she would say. Once she stepped inside the overheated building, she shed her coat, went into the auditorium, and began to meet parents.

She had just joined a particularly large group of parents who were standing near the punchbowl when her gaze swept across the room and halted. In shock she looked into a pair of very blue eyes with thick, long-fringed lashes.

Reece strolled leisurely toward her. Her erratic heartbeat raced faster as she stop-

ped speaking and he moved to her side. She felt lost in his blue eyes and watched helplessly as he turned to the group.

"I hate to interrupt this meeting, but I have an announcement to make. Mrs. Dunbar has consented to be my wife, and she'll have to leave her job as principal."

She was dreaming. She'd wake up at home, and Reece would be thousands of miles away in Chile. He really didn't say she would have to terminate her job. She felt rooted to the spot, unable to move.

Even though that was exactly what she had planned to do, this wasn't the way she had intended to go about it.

He continued as blandly as if he were announcing the serving of lemonade and cookies. "There's a plane to Chile to catch, so if you nice people will please excuse us, I'll take my fiancée and go."

Those blue eyes focused on her with full impact. "Are you coming?" Wordlessly she joined him, and they moved off leaving behind a stunned room of parents, who began to buzz with conversation.

Lily walked around the corner and down the empty, brightly-lit hall toward her office. Beside her, Reece's brown boots clicked against the polished red tile floor. They turned another corner and both stopped to face each other.

"Of all the arrogance!" she said and couldn't wait another second to throw her arms around his neck.

His arms wrapped around her and crushed her against him. "Lily, please marry me?"

"I'll have to after that announcement. I'll never get another job in Des Moines!"

She felt the breath go out of his lungs. He shifted and kissed her until she thought she would faint. Finally she moved away a fraction.

"You've embarrassed me enough tonight. Just like that, Reece Wakefield, you walk up in front of all those people

and announce we're getting married. . . ."

Instead of his familiar grin, he gazed at her somberly, his voice filled with urgency. "Lily, I can't live without you."

Her heart flipped, sending erratic currents racing through her veins. Suddenly she wanted out of the school, away from any interruptions. "Let me get my coat, and we'll go to my house."

"Will you marry me?"

"Yes. I sent you a letter to tell you so."

He frowned. "Dammit! Why didn't you phone?"

Now it seemed absurd, but she said, "If you had changed your mind after I left, I thought a letter would give you a better chance to let me know."

He groaned. "Woman, do you know what I've gone through? Next time I propose and you decide to accept, pick up a phone and call."

"I'll do that," she agreed happily as he gathered her up in his arms. ♥



Aegean Affair

A DIGEST
ORIGINAL

When Larissa Michaelis moves to Greece, she thinks it is to help her godfather in his import/export firm. But once in Athens, she meets handsome Vasilis Stephanos, and her life becomes complicated with romance—and intrigue.

LYNNAN WATERS

The sun dawned amber over the stones of the Parthenon high above Athens, Greece, but reality was slower to dawn for Larissa Michaelis. Could it be just six weeks since she had graduated from Ohio State? Just six weeks since her parents had died in that fiery crash? Larissa pressed her fingers to her forehead as if to erase the pain of the past. Gradually she began to feel the warmth of the rising sun and lifted her face to let its

rays dry her tears.

Larissa tossed her dark auburn curls and turned from the balcony to dress for her first morning with the Athens office of Olympus International. Stepping into the slim grey skirt to her new suit, she hoped that her image would be professional and that her godfather, Theodor Pappas, would be pleased. It was his confidence and support after her parents' death that had carried her through that dread-

From AEGEAN AFFAIRS by Lynnann Waters. Copyright © 1986 by Nancy Harper and Lynda Vokonas. Published by permission of the authors. All rights reserved.

ful time and eventually brought her to this position in his import/export firm.

Larissa had been delighted that Theodor could attend her commencement exercises since he had rarely been able to visit her family. Despite the fact that he was a widower with a son of his own, Theodor never forgot to send her a personal gift at Christmas, and he always remembered her birthdays with a gold charm to go on the bracelet he had given to her at her baptism. It would have been enough that he'd come to see her graduate, but he had also brought her another gift—one that had saved her life.

As the memories of that day crowded in, Larissa sank weakly onto the edge of her bed. It was a day that had started gloriously and ended tragically. After the graduation Larissa, her parents, and Theodor had all gone out for a celebration dinner. When they had finished dessert, Theodor surprised Larissa by handing her the keys to the new midnight blue sportscar that he had been driving. Thrilled, she had offered to drive him back to the hotel where they were all staying. At first they were right behind her parents' station wagon, but when it started to rain, Larissa had to pull over to put up the top on the little MG.

Consequently, she and Theodor had not seen the semi-truck jack knife on the wet pavement or witness her father futilely brake to avoid hitting it. By the time she and Theodore arrived on the scene, her parents' car was barely recognizable through the wall of flames that engulfed both it and the truck. The horrifying sight seared itself into her memory forever.

Larissa expelled a shaky breath. She glanced at her travel alarm as she struggled to bring herself back to the present. As she stood up, her eyes were drawn to the framed picture of Theodor on her dresser. He had always been special to her, and now he was the closest thing to family that

she had left. Larissa fondly recalled their conversation in his elegant New York penthouse the day after the memorial service.

"As your godfather, I feel a responsibility for you since your parents are gone. Your father and I were friends since we were children in Greece, but I am not offering you a position out of pity, or even obligation. I need your skills in accounting and, more importantly, I need someone I can trust. I know that you speak Greek, and that's another reason that I can use you in Athens."

"You know that I'm grateful for what you're offering me," Larissa had responded. "But what about your son? Didn't Father tell me that he went to work for you after he got out of the Army?"

Theodor's smile had broadened, "Yes, Bill's been with Olympus International for three years now. He's quite instrumental to one of my operations. So much so that I can't afford to involve him in this situation."

"Situation?" Larissa had repeated questioningly.

His face sobering immediately, Theodor had responded, "Our Athens branch has been losing money for the past three months. The olive oil warehouses that account for our largest Greek profits are being sabotaged according to the reports I've been receiving from Thanasi Lignos, my Athens manager. Thanasi has been acting as his own controller, but now I feel he needs to be freed of those responsibilities in order to investigate. So, Larissa, will you go to Athens for me?"

Accepting the controller's position had helped Larissa keep her mind off her grief, and she was eager to reward her godfather's confidence in her skills. As resolve built within her, she looked in the mirror, buttoned her blue silk blouse, and smiled as she remembered how Theodor had insisted on buying it for her, noting

that it matched the deep color of her eyes. "Aegean blue" he had called them, and Larissa thought of how her Irish mother would have scoffed at that idea. After all, her eyes were her only Gaelic feature; the rest of her face, from her pale olive complexion and aquiline nose to her small firm chin and full lips were undoubtedly Greek. She glanced in the mirror one last time and saw reflected an image of poise and grace, which unfortunately she did not exactly feel. Nevertheless, she closed the door to the small apartment that Thanasi Lignos had arranged for and walked confidently downstairs to catch a taxi.

Once she arrived at the office, Larissa was immediately impressed by Thanasi. The tufts of grey at his temples gave him an air of distinction, and his bearing was stately despite a build that attested to his love of good food. As he showed her through the spacious office building, she was struck by his European charm. At one point, Thanasi waved his hand toward an open door and announced, "There's your new office," but steered her past it and into his own plush suite.

"Tea and pastries, Helen," he said over his shoulder to his secretary before closing the door. Larissa looked around the tastefully decorated office and sank into a large leather chair next to the imposing mahogany desk.

"Mr. Lignos," Larissa began.

"Please, call me Thanasi," he interrupted.

"Thanasi," she began again. "I'm most impressed by everything you've shown me, and I hope that I can be helpful to you." There was a light tap at the door and Helen entered with a tray which she placed on the corner of the desk. Thanasi nodded an acknowledgment as she turned to leave, then he poured Larissa a cup of tea. Handing it to her, he smiled and said, "I'm sure you will

be most helpful, my dear Larissa."

The endearment puzzled Larissa somewhat and she attempted to shift the conversation back to a more professional level. "I noticed some file cabinets in my office. Will I find the financial statements there?" she queried.

Thanasi hesitated and then smiled over his cup. "Things move at a more leisurely pace over here. There will be time enough to discuss business details later. It's a beautiful day and you must get to know Athens before you can fully understand Olympus International."

"But I have so much to learn here," Larissa protested.

"Consider this your first lesson," he said smoothly, yet his tone left no room for further disagreement. "Go explore our city. My car and driver are at your disposal. I'll see you tomorrow at nine o'clock."

So, sooner than she had expected, Larissa was again back at her apartment standing in front of her mirror. Quickly shedding her suit and high-heeled pumps, she slipped into a colorful print skirt and a jade green T-shirt. She scrambled through her half-unpacked suitcases until she located a comfortable pair of canvas espadrilles, then grabbing up her camera and shoulder bag, she dashed back to the waiting car.

"I never thought I'd spend my first day on the job like this!" she mused, thinking again of Thanasi's unusual directive as she relaxed in the backseat. Further thoughts of Olympus International were quickly banished from her mind by the classic sights of the city, which Demos, the driver, described in a running commentary.

Despite his friendliness, Larissa noticed that Demos grew restless around lunchtime as they headed toward the Acropolis. "My father talked so much of this place that I really want to take my time seeing

it." she told him. "How about if you come back for me about three o'clock? You can go and have some lunch and I'll eat at one of the *tavernas* when I get hungry."

Demos gave her a look of doubt mixed with relief, but agreed to return for her at three. "If you change your mind, call the office switchboard and I'll come right away. Yes?"

"Yes. Thank you, Demos."

Larissa purchased a small guidebook from one of the shops and began her walking tour. "The Acropolis," she read, "is a collection of temples built on the steep, fortress-like crag that dominates the surrounding area. In 443 B.C., the Greek ruler Pericles first envisioned the glory of Athens and employed the very best artisans and architects of the time to build the temples whose ruins still inspire and awe modern man." Larissa certainly was awed by the majesty of the monumental gateway, the Propylaea, as she passed through its entrance to the holy places of the Acropolis. But even her father's remembered accounts and the poetic prose of the guidebook failed to prepare her for what she felt when she gazed at the splendor around her. The towering marble columns seemed to change from amber gold to rosy gray as the sun played hide-and-seek behind the fluffy white clouds. The Parthenon, sacred shrine to the Goddess Athena, drew her like a magnet, but Larissa promised herself to save that temptingly beautiful temple for last.

The ancient ruins contrasted sharply with the pace of the modern city below. It seemed as if this place of the gods was a haven from the frantic, petty actions of mere mortals, and Larissa felt an aura of peace as the surrounding ruins drew her close to the memory of her father. How she wished they'd had the chance to experience this together.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes, Father, it's very beautiful."

"I'm sorry, the lady mistakes me for someone else?" the voice at her elbow apologized.

Larissa spun quickly and faced a lean, tall man of about thirty. He wore a Greek sailor's cap pushed far back on his head so that it failed to control his thick, curly brown hair. Two obsidian dark eyes scanned her face appreciatively as a smile began to form, revealing gleaming white teeth that contrasted with the deep tan of his skin.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" Larissa gasped. "I was thinking of my father. You're right, it is beautiful."

"Your father is here with you?" he questioned.

"No," she said softly. "Both my parents were killed in an accident in the States not long ago. Father always wanted to bring me here because Greece was his home."

"I'm sorry about your loss," the stranger sympathized. "Since you seem to be alone, may I be your guide? My name is Vasilis Stephanos," he said, extending his hand, "and Athens is my home."

Confused, Larissa shook his hand and asked, "Why are you speaking English?"

"Because I knew you were. Your English guidebook gave you away," he grinned.

"But you speak like an American."

"I spent several years in the States and got my degree there." Vasilis smiled again and awaited her decision.

Larissa finally returned his smile. "I'd like for you to be my guide. I'm Larissa Michaelis, and it's nice to meet someone else who's been in the States."

For the next hour they climbed over the stones together, and Larissa forgot about her camera, trying instead to capture each vista on the film of her memory. They moved around the perimeter of the

hilltop, stopping to study the classic simplicity of the Temple of Victory with its intricately carved frieze.

"Trust the Greek male to be surrounded by pretty girls, even in death!" joked Vasilis as he and Larissa explored the Porch of the Maidens on the tomb of Athens' legendary founder king. Vasilis was trying to lighten her mood, sensing that even though it was beautiful, the burial site was still a sad reminder for Larissa. When his humor had no effect, he took her by the hand and led her away.

"Twentieth century air pollution did more damage to those carved maidens than nature has in two thousand years," Vasilis informed her. Seeing her eyes widen he continued, "The statues we were just admiring are copies. The original maidens are all safely displayed in museums to preserve their artistry for many years to come."

Now Larissa gave a sigh of relief. "That's one of the few times I've felt good about seeing a replica," she told him, finding that she enjoyed his company. His conversation was intelligent yet underscored with a sense of humor which surfaced readily and put her at ease.

"I think we've seen everything except the Parthenon," Vasilis finally observed. "Let's see that and then get something to drink. In fact, if you haven't had lunch, I know a little *taverna* nearby that has good wine and makes a tasty gyro sandwich."

"Sounds great," she said. "I'm not used to all this climbing. But I still have enough energy left to see the Parthenon." The Parthenon truly was the crowning glory. Originally a temple, then a Christian church, and later a Moslem mosque, it seemed appropriate and perfectly natural to Larissa and Vasilis to converse in whispers as they walked slowly through the pale ruins. It was amazing to Larissa that ancient stone could have such a restorative effect on her, although she

knew that part of her contentment stemmed from the delightful presence of Vasilis. He seemed equally awed by the Parthenon, though he had visited it many times. A sense of wonder stayed with them both as they left the Acropolis and made their way down the hillside.

A few moments later they entered the cool dim cafe Vasilis had mentioned, and only then did Larissa look at her watch. Noticing Vasilis's questioning look, she quickly explained, "I have to be back at the Acropolis by three. I work for Olympus International, and they're sending a car for me then."

"That gives us plenty of time," he said as he signaled to the waiter. After placing their order, Vasilis turned his attention toward Larissa. "So, you're not just a tourist," he commented, "and yet you're sightseeing on a work day."

"I'm not playing hooky," she grinned. "Actually, today is my first day with Olympus and this is my first assignment. Thanasi Lignos, my boss, told me that I had to learn Athens before Olympus. What about you? You can't be on assignment to see Athens too!"

His eyes danced. "No such luck! I've got to be at work soon myself. I'm a computer consultant and set my own hours depending on the job. I often come to the Acropolis to escape the stress of the city."

By the time they finished their sandwiches, it was nearly three. Vasilis paid the bill and ushered Larissa toward his small red Fiat, which he had parked close by. Checking his watch again, he told her, "I can drop you back at the Acropolis, but I'm afraid I won't be able to wait with you 'til your ride comes."

"That's fine. I'm sure it won't be long."

As he pulled into the parking lot at the base of the Acropolis, Vasilis turned to look at Larissa. "I've really enjoyed spending the afternoon with you and I'd

like to see you again. May I call you?"

"Thanks, I'd like that, but I'm afraid that I haven't arranged for a phone yet." Larissa paused, leaving the next move up to him.

Vasilis took her hand and said, "In that case, I will invite you now to have dinner with me tomorrow night. I have a favorite seafood restaurant over on the coast that I think you might enjoy."

"Alright," she agreed after only a slight hesitation. "I live in the Delphi Apartments, number 43."

Vasilis glanced in the rearview mirror. "I think that's your car I see coming," he said. He quickly squeezed her hand and promised, "I'll pick you up at seven-thirty tomorrow."

Almost before Larissa could close the door, the Fiat sped away. Turning, a hint of a smile on her lips, Larissa stepped into the black limousine. Demos continued to point out the sights as they returned through the city, but this time Larissa heard very little of what he had to say. All she could hear was Vasilis's resonant voice; all she could see was his handsome Greek visage.

A half an hour later Vasilis's red sports car was secured in the underground garage, and he sat at his desk in the apartment above. Thoughts of the afternoon were on his mind as he composed a brief telegram. Picking up the phone, he dialed Western Union and read "CONTACT MADE WITH LM STOP NOTHING NEW ON OLYMPUS STOP VASILIS." Later, as darkness began to fall, he donned a black cotton pullover with his jeans and slipped out into the night.

The next morning passed slowly for Larissa as she settled into her office and began to read the reams of documents that regulated the export firm. Thanasi had asked her to join him for lunch in his office, and she looked forward to talking

more with him about her job. When noon arrived, Larissa and Thanasi enjoyed a delicious meal served in his office, but he diligently avoided discussion of Olympus and kept their conversation light. Larissa finally decided that the "business lunch" must not be a Greek practice.

Over coffee, Thanasi suddenly asked her about Theodor. The question surprised her somewhat, but Larissa responded simply, "He's fine."

After only a brief pause, Thanasi asked, "Did Theodor explain to you the problems we've been having?"

"He said that there had been some profit losses due to sabotage, but he didn't go into any detail. He hoped that my coming here would give you more time to investigate."

Thanasi lit a cigarette and squinted his eyes as he considered Larissa through the swirling smoke. He slowly exhaled. "I thought that the first incident, a warehouse fire, was just accidental," Thanasi began, "so I wasn't really investigating at that point. Then, not three weeks later, several shipments of olive oil were stolen from the docks before they could be loaded for transport. Just last week there was another fire. Not only have we lost the profits from the oil, but some of our best customers have taken their business elsewhere since we were unable to deliver on schedule."

"Do you have any idea who is responsible?"

"We assume that it's a competitor and we're working on some good leads." The buzz of the intercom interrupted them as Helen called in to remind Thanasi of an appointment. "Thank you, Helen." Thanasi turned to Larissa, "I'm glad we had this little talk my dear. Demos will be out front for you at five."

Knowing she had been dismissed, Larissa thanked him for lunch and returned to the stack of manuals waiting in her

office. But instead of sitting down to the work immediately, Larissa walked to the window and stared sightlessly out into the sunshine. He mind was reeling with the magnitude of what Thanasi had told her. She had known there were losses, but she'd never truly understood the consequences or imagined the nature of the destruction. There was obviously more at stake here than just reduced profits for Olympus.

With effort, she forced herself to return to the tedious materials on her desk, and by five o'clock she had managed to skim through most of the tomes.

As promised, Demos was waiting for Larissa and helped her into the car with a friendly greeting. He said little to her on the way to her apartment, addressing most of his well-chosen words to the drivers of other vehicles caught in the rush of traffic. She didn't mind: her brain was already concentrating on the relaxing bath and short nap she had planned before her date with Vasilis.

By seven o'clock Larissa felt refreshed and was eagerly anticipating the evening. She dressed carefully, and when Vasilis arrived and beamed his approval, Larissa knew that the sapphire blue silk dress enhanced her best features. His own navy blazer and open-collared white shirt made him seem more broad shouldered than she remembered, and the heavy gold chain that shone at his neck lent him style and assurance. She caught herself thinking of them as a handsome "couple" when in truth they hardly knew each other.

"Have another gruelling day?" he teased, helping her into the car.

"Well, my feet didn't get as tired, but I have to admit that today was a lot less stimulating than yesterday," she responded.

"You never did tell me exactly what you do at Olympus."

"I was hired to be the controller, but today all I did was read trade regulation manuals." Larissa noticed that the traffic was thinning and asked, "Where are we going?"

"We're on the coast road to Glyfada, a seaside resort. I'm sorry that it's too dark to see the Aegean, but even at night the lights of the marina are picturesque."

When they arrived at the restaurant the waiter seemed to know Vasilis and quickly honored his request for a window table overlooking the harbor. "I come here often," he told Larissa, as if reading her thoughts. "The food is good, and I have a sailboat at the Glyfada marina."

After asking her consent, Vasilis ordered for them both and then settled back comfortably.

"You mentioned that you have a sailboat," began Larissa.

"Ah yes, and she's a beauty! Do you sail?"

Her eyes shone. "I love it! Not that I got many chances in Ohio, but once I discovered it, I went all I could. I love the sense of freedom you get from running with the wind."

"Yes!" Vasilis beamed his understanding and finished the thought for her. "No noisy motors, just the wind, the water and the sky."

Larissa smiled softly and tasted a sip of her wine. "I guess you grew up sailing in these waters." She could picture Vasilis as a small bronzed boy, barefoot on the smooth deck of a sloop. His answer dispelled the image.

"No, actually sailing is something I learned in the States too. I lived in Boston for a while, and the harbor there offered the perfect opportunity."

"A Greek who had to leave his island to learn to sail," Larissa noted lightheartedly. But Vasilis did not smile and quickly averted his eyes.

"Life is ironic," he stated simply, then

changed the subject. "How do you like these stuffed grape leaves?"

Larissa realized with a flush of embarrassment that she had been so taken with Vasilis that she had not given due attention to the food in front of her. She had enough Greek relatives to know what an insult it was to refuse food, so hastily she sampled the piquant appetizer. The blended flavors of dill, pine nuts and currants were delicious.

"These are wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Mother took Greek cooking classes so she could fix father's favorite dishes, but I'm afraid she was basically a beef roast and potatoes kind of cook."

Vasilis laughed. "Then I must do all I can to introduce you to authentic Greek food." Larissa nodded, looking forward to the prospect.

While they were waiting for the main course of their meal, the *bouzouki* player returned from his break and Vasilis noted that Larissa was keeping time with the pulsating rhythm of the music. "Makes you want to dance, doesn't it?" As she nodded her agreement, Vasilis stood and held out his hand to her. They wove their way through the tables to the small dance floor and began the intricate steps of the folk dance.

"*Yah sou!*" shouted someone from a nearby table and Larissa and Vasilis grinned as they returned the friendly greeting. Everyone clapped harder and faster as the tempo of the music increased. They cheered as the blue silk swirled around Larissa's slim legs while she skillfully executed the final steps and ended the dance in Vasilis's arms. Vasilis and Larissa smiled to the enthusiastic crowd and returned to their table.

It was strangely exhilarating for Larissa to discover that two people from such different backgrounds could quickly find so much common ground. "You're quite a dancer," she complimented Vasilis.

"Thanks, but I think it was *you* that made me look good!" he grinned as the waiter arrived with their lamb shish kebabs. Larissa and Vasilis ate and talked with the easy comfort of long-time friends, despite the fact that they had only met the day before. When they had finished their meal, they shared a rich piece of baklava, a pastry filled with nuts and honey, and sipped strong Greek coffee with snifters of brandy on the side. The waiter pocketed Vasilis's more than generous tip and pretended not to notice as they left the restaurant carrying their glasses of brandy with them. Descending from the pier, they walked arm in arm on the beach, drinking in the sights and sounds of the night along with the brandy.

"Let's risk angering the gods and make a toast on the *last* of our drinks," Vasilis proposed. As Larissa lifted her glass, he clinked it gently and said, "To more beautiful evenings together." They finished the last of the mellow brandy and, by silent agreement, tossed their glasses into the lapping waves.

Then their eyes locked as he bent to kiss her. Larissa's lips met his tentatively, but she surprised them both when tears began streaming down her cheeks. He pulled back and looked at her questioningly. Seeing the pain and confusion that filled her face, he prepared to apologize. But just then, Larissa dropped her head onto his chest, and Vasilis simply wrapped his arms around her protectively, stroked her silken hair, and waited.

"I'm sorry," she whispered raggedly. "I feel like I'm on an emotional roller coaster. It's too soon...I haven't had enough time to work out my feelings since my parents died. I really like you, but..." Emotion choked off her words.

Vasilis's voice was gentle. "I understand." His lips brushed her forehead and they stood together gazing out to sea. The

laughter of revelers leaving the restaurant finally broke their pensive mood, and they turned to make their way back across the glimmering sand. Vasilis drove slowly back into the city, and the warm night breezes whispered in through the open windows. The spotlight Acropolis stood as if it were still the city's sentinel. Larissa felt a sense of security that had nothing to do with the stone ruins. She had found someone who understood and cared about her.

At her front door, Vasilis slipped the key out of her hand and inserted it in the lock. When the door swung open, he reached inside, switched on the light, and returned the key to her. "It was wonderful," he said leaning forward. His lips touched her cheek tenderly, and he added, "Til next time."

Larissa watched him disappear down the stairs and then stepped back inside and closed the door. As she undressed for bed, she recalled her college days. She remembered those times when she had wondered if her date had meant it when he said he would call. Tonight, there was no question. She knew instinctively that she would see Vasilis again.

The rest of Larissa's first week was spent gathering financial reports and records from countless files and desk drawers. She was not sure whether Thanasi's bookkeeping methods were really as chaotic as they appeared or if he was not yet sure of her ability to handle financial matters. Back in the States, he would have been termed a chauvinist, since, true to the old European tradition, he seemed to believe that a woman's place was firmly under a man's protective direction. While he was nothing but charming to Larissa, she couldn't help but believe that a woman would not have been his first choice for the controller's position. He never provided her with copies of the

reports that he sent to Theodor in the New York office, nor did he allow her access to the computer terminal, dismissing it as "too complicated" for a woman.

Larissa shook her head sadly as she closed a ledger book late Friday afternoon. All she could do was to keep working hard to earn Thanasi's respect. Monday would be another day. The end of the week had dragged—not because of work but because Vasilis had never phoned. Tired and disappointed Larissa packed her briefcase and headed downstairs to let Demos drive her home.

As she tried to relax in the backseat of the big car she told herself she was looking forward to a quiet weekend, but the truth was that she wished she had a date with Vasilis. She had been so sure that he would come by, or call her at the office. He must not have understood her after all, or he would have known how much she needed a friend. She half hoped to find him waiting on her doorstep when Demos dropped her off, but, of course, he was not.

After picking at the light supper that she fixed herself, Larissa went to bed early with a new novel. The fatigue of the week quickly caught up with her, and she fell asleep with the unread book still open beside her.

A persistent tapping woke her the next morning. A steady rain was coming down, but there was something else. Her still sleepy mind took another moment to recognize the sound of someone knocking on her door. She scrambled out of bed and threw a light robe around her as she hurried to the door.

"Vasilis!" she exclaimed, when she opened it, pleased but not entirely sure she wasn't still dreaming. Wet rivulets of rain ran off his cap, his clothes were soaked, and diamond drops of water made his eyelashes glisten. "Come in, come in! You look like a drowned rat."

"Thanks," he said stepping inside. "I don't know what I look like, but I'm afraid I acted like a rat for not calling you after the wonderful time we had together the other night. I hope you can forgive me. I've wanted to call, but I didn't want to interrupt you on the job, and it's been too late to come by when I finish up with my own work. Anyway, I just decided to try my luck and see if you'd like to spend today with me—if you haven't already made other plans."

Never one to be coy, Larissa could already feel a smile beginning to form on her lips. "I can't imagine a nicer way to spend a dreary day—unless you were planning a picnic!"

Vasilis laughed. "Not hardly! No, I thought you might like to visit the surrounding countryside and sample some of the local delicacies. After all, I did promise to introduce you to real Greek food."

"Sounds great! I'll get dressed and fix us some coffee. Just a minute." Larissa hurried into the bedroom and returned with a blanket which she held out to Vasilis. He glanced sheepishly at the wet spot his clothes were making on her rug and then raised his eyebrows rakishly as she instructed, "Take off your clothes."

Larissa had to laugh at his mock-lecherous look. "I wasn't finished. I meant that I'll toss your things in the dryer. You can wrap up in this blanket."

"All alone?" he teased.

It made Larissa suddenly aware that she was still in her thin robe, and she quickly retreated back to her room to change, hearing the pleasant rumble of Vasilis's laughter as she closed the door firmly behind her. Larissa dressed in a casual pair of slacks and a colorful cotton sweater, then she went out to collect Vasilis's wet things. After putting his jeans and pullover in the dryer she followed the sound of humming and found

Vasilis in her kitchen, making coffee while draped shiek-like in the blanket she had given him. He was not aware of her presence in the doorway, so she stopped for just a moment to watch him. It was amazing that he could look so self-assured no matter what he was doing... or wearing, Larissa thought to herself.

The coffee was just what they needed, and by the time they had finished their second cup, Vasilis's things were dry. The rain was no more than a drizzle as they hurried to Vasilis's little Fiat, but Larissa was glad she had put on a windbreaker. He was a skillful driver, and soon they were leaving the traffic behind, heading west on the road to Corinth.

In spite of the rain, or perhaps because of it, the olive groves and lemon orchards had an almost mystical look, and Larissa was content to gaze out of the window at the rolling fields. As they approached the narrow, steep Corinth canal, Vasilis prepared Larissa for what they would be seeing.

"We'll soon cross into Corinth," he explained. "I want to show you the Temple of Apollo, and then we'll stop at a *taverna* that serves some of the best food you've ever tasted." The rain had stopped completely, and a hesitant sun peeked out as Vasilis parked near the temple and helped Larissa out. A light breeze whispered through the seven remaining Doric columns and the waves in the Gulf of Corinth behind the temple splashed foam into the backdrop of sky.

"This place *is* music and poetry," sighed Larissa. "I can certainly see why Apollo's temple was built here."

Vasilis nodded and tenderly took her hand. "I knew you'd like it," he said as they strolled around the site. Finally more spatters of rain sent them hurrying back to the car. Lunch was as good as Vasilis had promised. Larissa discovered that she really enjoyed the unusual flavor com-

inations, and she fell in love with the cinnamon and honey drenched sweets.

They spent the rest of the afternoon exploring Mycenae, famous for its superb amphitheater. Vasilis told Larissa that a festival of Greek plays was performed there every summer, and they decided to return together to see a performance.

Vasilis chose another restaurant for their evening meal, and again the food was delicious. Larissa was too full even for baklava, so they finished their dinner with cups of thick, sweet demitasse coffee, brewed one cup at a time right at their table.

"I could get used to this," praised Larissa.

"It is good," agreed Vasilis, "And it's guaranteed to keep us awake on the drive home!"

Vasilis slid his arm around Larissa's waist as they walked to the car. It felt so completely natural that Larissa moved closer to him. Although they had dodged the rain all through the day, the night sky twinkled with thousands of stars, and the air was freshly washed and scented with wildflowers.

It was very late when they pulled up in front of Larissa's apartment, but she still hated to have the day end. Arm in arm they slowly climbed the stairs, and this time, when Vasilis gently pulled Larissa into his embrace, she responded with an intensity that grew apace with his.

"I think I'm ready for this," she murmured into his hair. "But I'm still not sure I'm sure. Am I making any sense?"

Stroking her silky hair, Vasilis smiled his wide, appealing smile and assured her, "There will be other times and other places for us to find that out. Now get some sleep." His lips caressed hers once more before he reluctantly said goodnight and turned toward the stairs. "Oh, I almost forgot. I'm going out of town tomorrow so I may not be in touch for a

few days, but I do want to see you again..." Larissa nodded her answer, her eyes shining. Vasilis raised two fingers in a jaunty farewell gesture and was gone.

Larissa's workweek again sped by. Thanasi finally let her make two elementary entries on the computer and promised her home office financial reports by the end of the month. He seemed moody and evasive all week, but on Friday afternoon his mood changed. He came into her office, and almost as if he were her godfather, put a friendly arm around her shoulder and said, "You've been here two weeks, and my wife Zena has been scolding me for not bringing you home to dinner sooner. How about tomorrow?"

Larissa smiled and nodded.

"We always have cocktails at four by the pool," he concluded on his way out the door.

It would be nice to have something to look forward to on Saturday, Larissa decided. She had heard nothing from Vasilis nor did she know when he would be back. She certainly didn't relish the idea of another evening alone in her apartment.

Almost before she had finished the thought, Helen burst into Larissa's office. "Look at this!" she exclaimed, setting a vase with a single yellow rose in it on the desk. "You already have an admirer." With a knowing grin, she left Larissa to open the card in private.

The significance of Vasilis's message was not lost on Larissa, as she read:

Next time—Sunday, 11 o'clock

Next place—my sailboat

'Til then,—V

Grinning broadly, she scooped up her briefcase and decided to take the rest of her work home.

As Demos dropped her off Larissa heard the apartment manager call to her. She waved to Demos and walked over to

where the landlord was waiting.

"The telephone men were here today to put in your phone. I let them in and locked up after them." Larissa thanked him, and he winked, saying "I guess pretty ladies get faster service." Larissa laughed and headed up the stairs.

Larissa slept late the next morning, grateful for the weekend. Slipping on her robe, she wandered out into the living room, and noticed the quarterly budget papers that she had left spread out over the coffee table. Although she hadn't finished studying them, she decided to leave the work until later.

She drank her coffee on the balcony and then dressed to go to the open-air markets. She planned to buy some wine for Thanasi and Zena, as well as fruit, cheese, and bread for Sunday.

Unsure of which bus to take to the market, she decided to ask directions from the apartment manager. Skipping down the stairs, she noticed the manager's wife out sweeping the marble stoop. "*Tekanis*," she greeted the woman. "Could you tell me where to catch the bus to the *plaka*?"

The plumpish older woman stopped sweeping and wiped her hands on her crisp white apron. The laugh lines around her eyes deepened as she beamed at Larissa, welcoming the interruption. With effusive gestures she instructed Larissa where to catch the bus, which one to take, and when to get off. Larissa thanked her and hurried off, though she sensed that the woman could have talked away half the morning.

Finding the sights and smells of the market mesmerizing, Larissa soon lost track of the time. Sampling the various delicacies, she "lunched" her way through the bazaar and also managed to fill her shopping bag in the process. Hearing the chimes from a nearby church

reminded her of her evening engagement, and she hurried to catch the next bus back.

Within an hour, Larissa was showered, dressed, and in a taxi on her way to the Lignos home. Before she could lift the heavy brass knocker, the door was opened and she was escorted down elaborate picture-lined corridors to the white marble courtyard where Thanasi and his wife lounged near a sparkling pool. There was also a young man mixing a drink at the portable bar.

"Ah, Larissa," said Thanasi as he rose in greeting. "This is my wife Zena."

The statuesque woman got up from her chaise and moved forward with studied sophistication. She laid her carefully rouged cheek along side Larissa's and kissed the air next to her ear. The sincerity of the welcome seemed to Larissa to be as artificial as the brassy color of the woman's upswept copper hair. Linking a diamond encrusted hand through Larissa's arm, Zena guided her toward the young man.

"And this is our son, Anthony," she crooned.

The young man's dark eyes boldly scrutinized Larissa's every curve as he bent to kiss her hand. She was rather surprised to learn that Thanasi had a son, and was struck by his resemblance to Vasilis. Yet there was something uncomfortable about his penetrating gaze, and Larissa tried to withdraw her hand. Anthony's grasp tightened as he murmured in a throaty voice, "I may take more interest in Olympus now that I know that the accountant is so lovely. . . I'll certainly take more interest in the accountant." He again pressed his lips to her captive fingers before releasing them as his father came over to offer Larissa a drink.

Thanasi proved to be a congenial host and kept the poolside conversation light and pleasant. Larissa's glass was never

nounced that it was time for dinner. Following her hostess into the house, Larissa was awed by the palatial surroundings. She complimented Zena on the magnificence of her home, but could not help making a mental comparison between this ostentatious residence and Theodor's comfortably elegant penthouse.

Later, in the candlelit dining room, the household staff served a lavish meal that easily rivaled that of the finest restaurant. Zena continued to be outwardly polite to Larissa, but Thanasi was the primary focus of her attention. Watching them interact made Larissa feel awkward, since Zena's manner with her husband was one of flirtatious seduction. Thanasi, however, seemed to enjoy it, and Anthony ignored both parents entirely. He was totally involved in playing his own game of flirtation with an unwilling Larissa.

Feeling ill at ease, Larissa sought to avoid the further ritual of after-dinner coffee and liqueurs. Pleading a headache, she asked if the butler could call her a cab. As she had feared, Anthony immediately insisted on driving her home.

"Of course Anthony will take you," agreed Thanasi. "I'm sorry we have to bring this pleasant evening to an early close, but I'm sure you'll feel better after a good night's sleep."

After thanking them for their hospitality, Larissa warily lowered herself into the ostentatious Lincoln next to a smirking Anthony. As they roared out of the driveway, Anthony announced, "You're not fooling me with that headache story, but it was a good excuse to have me all to yourself."

Larissa was speechless at his audacity, but she quickly found words when she felt his hand squeeze her thigh. "My headache is *real* and getting worse!" she snapped as she angrily struck his hand

home!"

Undaunted by her rebuff, Anthony chuckled and said, "My pleasure."

Hoping to divert his attention from her, Larissa asked Anthony about his studies at the university, but his answers were only cursory, and he continued his flattery. His persistence was disconcerting, but as eager as she was for the ride to be over, Larissa was also reluctant. She knew from Anthony's behavior that he would not simply say goodnight and leave.

When the car pulled up to the curb, Larissa swiftly gave her thanks and got out. Anthony was also prepared, and she found him immediately at her side, ready to escort her to her door. Pressing close to her, he gripped her arm and ushered her up the stairs saying, "Father would never forgive me if I didn't see you safely tucked in."

Larissa jerked her arm away in protest, and the apartment key flew out of her hand and clanked against the doorjamb. Anthony retrieved it and fitted it into the lock triumphantly.

"Thank you," Larissa began, but the rest of her words were cut off as Anthony's lips bruised her own, and she stumbled backward into the apartment. She whirled around in confusion when a familiar voice from behind her inquired, "Am I interrupting?" Relief flooded through her as she saw Vasilis.

Struggling to control her emotions, she replied in what she hoped was her natural voice, "Certainly not." Anthony glowered as she continued, "This is Anthony, my boss Thanasi's son. He was just leaving. Anthony, meet Vasilis Stephanos."

Anthony mumbled his goodbyes and backed out into the hall. Larissa firmly closed the door, then turned to Vasilis. Her mind questioned his presence, but her body wanted only to be comforted in his

arms.

"Always lock the deadbolt," Vasilis whispered, answering the question he read in her eyes as he enfolded her in his embrace. The tension drained from her as she met his kiss, and this time she did not pull away. As if she were a child, Vasilis picked her up and carried her to the couch. He lowered her gently onto the cushions and asked, "How about a drink?"

Larissa refused with an impatient shake of her head. Vasilis settled next to her and waited.

"How did you get in, and why did you come tonight?" she questioned.

"Well, I tried convincing your sweet, talkative landlady to further the interests of love by letting me in, but when that didn't work I sneaked upstairs and used the old credit card trick."

Larissa shook her head with mock disapproval and told him, "If *you* couldn't charm her, no one could."

Vasilis shrugged slightly and smiled. "To answer your second question, the reason I'm here is because I wanted to confirm our date for tomorrow, and because I've missed you! I didn't know you had this," he added, laying a hand on the newly installed phone on the end table. As he touched it Larissa thought she noticed that her budget papers had been moved over next to the phone, but said nothing about it.

"I'm glad you did come," she told him instead. "I've missed you too... especially tonight."

"Why? What happened tonight?"

"I was invited to Thanasi's to meet his family and have dinner, and the evening was exhausting. When I wasn't being subjected to watching his wife Zena's seductive overtures to him, I was being leered at and pawed by their son. I really like Thanasi, but his family and his home made me very uncomfortable."

"How could a house make you feel uncomfortable?"

"It was so extravagant... I felt more like a tourist in a palace than a guest in their home. I counted six servants, and if Zena had been wearing one more diamond ring, she'd have needed a seventh servant just to help her lift her hand! This is the first time money has made me ill." Larissa snuggled closer and missed the intense expressions that moved across Vasilis's face.

Finally he said, "So, do we have a date for tomorrow?"

"We have a date."

In the stillness of the dimly lit room, Vasilis soon heard Larissa's even breathing and knew that she had fallen asleep. He eased up and tenderly laid her back against the pillows. After covering her with a light blanket from the bedroom, Vasilis turned off the light and quietly left the apartment.

A brilliant sun shining through the balcony glass door finally awakened Larissa. She was surprised to find herself on the sofa until the memories of the night before came rushing back. She colored with embarrassment when she realized that she had fallen asleep on Vasilis, but the feeling was short-lived.

As she showered and dressed, Larissa found that her thoughts never strayed far from Vasilis. Never had she felt so immediately drawn to a man. Why can't I get him out of my head? she wondered. Even as her mind posed the question, her heart gave the answer—she was falling in love with him.

Larissa had just finished packing the food she had purchased from the markets for their outing when she heard his knock. Opening the door for Vasilis, she taunted smilingly, "Glad you decided not to enter like a thief this time."

Vasilis returned the smile, "Sorry

about that," he rejoined, "but I assure you that I didn't steal anything."

"Nothing but my heart," Larissa thought to herself as he kissed her.

Vasilis helped her carry her things to his car and they headed for Glyfada Marina. By daylight, Larissa enjoyed the unspoiled beauty of the coast. She was also soon impressed by the size and beauty of Vasilis's boat once they reached the marina. Stowing the picnic lunch, she returned to the deck to assist him with casting off. The sails caught the breeze and they soon left the harbor behind them. Larissa found it exhilarating to be sailing again, and she laughed into the wind. Vasilis smiled at her pleasure and derived a pleasure of his own from watching her. Time passed quickly as they skillfully sailed the sleek craft in and out among the other boats. Vasilis pointed out a school of playful dolphins that leapt above the waves, and he mimicked the raucous cry of the seagulls that swooped down looking for bits of food.

Watching the birds reminded Larissa that she had eaten no breakfast, and she was glad when Vasilis suggested they have lunch. She unpacked the bread and cheese and they opened a bottle of Greek wine that Vasilis had brought along.

Feeling hot under the glaring midday sun, Vasilis removed his shirt, then went below to change into his bathing suit. As he stepped back through the hatch, a slow grin spread across his face when he noticed that Larissa had also shed her shirt and shorts. The aquamarine sea provided a dramatic backdrop for her lithe, bikini-clad figure, but Larissa was unaware of her effect on Vasilis until she heard his low whistle. Startled, she turned and blushed.

Gratefully accepting the glass of wine Vasilis had just replenished, Larissa took a sip, then gestured starboard with it. "What island is this?" she asked.

"I'm not sure it has a name, but it does

have a great cove for swimming. Want to check it out?"

"Aye, aye, Captain!" Larissa said, snapping a playful salute. Then she took the tiller as Vasilis trimmed the sails.

The water in the secluded cove was glassy smooth compared to the open Aegean, and Larissa marveled at its clarity as Vasilis dropped anchor. "Man overboard!" she shouted as she dove from the stern.

Vasilis soon broke surface right behind her and clasped her slim waist in his strong hands. His lips slanted across hers and he said, "The first mate was mistaken; it's definitely *woman* overboard!"

Larissa and Vasilis swam and cavorted in the azure water until he brushed her cheek and cautioned, "I think you've had enough of this Mediterranean sun."

Climbing back on board, he led Larissa below for dry towels. She was still drying off when Vasilis placed his cool fingers on her pink shoulder.

"Better let me put some lotion on that."

The lotion felt good, but his hands felt even better as he caressed her silky skin. The massage turned into an embrace. With their bodies pressed together, she could feel his rising desire through the thin fabric of his nylon trunks, and she made no move to resist when he began to unfasten the top of her bikini.

Backing her slowly to the bunk, his hands slid down her shapely hips and deftly removed the white bikini bottom. Larissa stretched sensually between the smooth, cool sheets of the narrow bunk, averting her eyes as Vasilis stripped off his clinging suit. His dark eyes smoldered with desire as he accepted the invitation implied by her shyly extended hand. He grasped her fingers and slipped into the bed beside her.

"You're so beautiful," he breathed, knowing that the words fell short of his

true feelings. "I've wanted you since that night on the beach."

She stroked his dark head as it moved downward, leaving a trail of hot kisses. Her flesh tingled as his tongue swirled paths on her temptingly rounded breasts. Her hands stroked lower and her nails lightly raked the muscles of his back.

"Larissa," he sighed huskily, pulling her body beneath his own. Nothing more was said as their bodies ignited in a conflagration of mutual passion. Their separate selves were welded into a complete union, and when Larissa's cry echoed his own, Vasilis knew neither of them had ever before experienced a pleasure this exquisite.

Later, in the afterglow of their love-making, the gentle rocking movement of the boat lulled them to sleep in each other's arms. The sun was already low on the horizon when they awoke, but their eyes, their lips, their hands, and their bodies explored each other again, this time with all the tenderness of their new-found love. Later still, Vasilis and Larissa went topside to raise the anchor and set sail for Glyfada.

It was nearly eleven when Larissa crawled into her own bed, alone. She felt lost in its wide expanse and wondered at the intensity of her longing for the attractive Greek. She flushed as she agonized, "What must he think of me? . . . that I'm *easy*? He has no way of knowing that he's the only man I've ever loved." But the warm memory of his parting embrace comforted her and his image filled her mind as she drifted into sleep.

The next several days passed more quickly than Larissa had thought possible. She worked hard each day at Olympus International and, even without the complete records, soon began to understand how the company's accounts were managed. Most of her evenings were spent with Vasilis. They usually had a

leisurely dinner together and then wandered about Athens and talked. Despite all the time they spent with each other, Larissa realized that she knew very little about him. He rarely mentioned his past and seemed to prefer talking about her job instead of his own. Twice he had called to postpone a date, saying only that he was detained by business matters. Yet, rather than being put off by his enigmatic behavior, Larissa found herself even more strongly attracted to him.

There was nothing puzzling about Anthony's behavior, however. Ever since the dinner at his home he had become an ever-present and unwelcome addition to Larissa's life. She tried being polite in her refusals to him, but he simply ignored her rebuffs.

He called her almost daily to ask her out. When polite refusals didn't work, she told him bluntly that she was not interested in dating him. But even this frankness did not stop him, and he began appearing at her office to take her to lunch. She hoped Thanasi would underscore her disapproval of such meetings, but he seemed quite delighted that Anthony was interested in Larissa.

One Wednesday Anthony was making a particular pest of himself. Even the efficient Helen had not been able to keep him out, and Larissa was doing her best to ignore him and concentrate on her work.

"How about lunch, my sweet?" he asked, after making himself comfortable in her office.

Larissa cringed at the meaningless endearment. "Sorry, but I'm not taking a lunch break today. I have to leave a little early."

"Not seeing that Stephanos creep again, are you?"

"No, I have some personal business to take care of," she informed him curtly. "Now if you'll excuse me. . ."

Instead of leaving, Anthony walked

over and leaned across the desk to place his thin fingers at her temples. "Headaches bothering you again, Dove? Perhaps you're going off to see a doctor." Larissa picked up on the facetious edge to his sugary tone. She knew he was simply trying to find out what she had planned, but maybe if she told him he would be satisfied and leave.

Sliding her chair back from the desk, she was able to escape his touch. "Thanks for your concern, but I'm fine. I'm leaving early so I can pick up my car. I've had it shipped over from the States."

Anthony brightened at this news. "Then I'll take you to pick it up!"

"I appreciate your offer, but I've already arranged for Demos to drive me."

A scowl crossed Anthony's brow, but only for an instant. "Alright," he conceded. "But if you change your mind, let me know."

"Will do," agreed Larissa, relieved to see him heading out the door at last. With him gone she quickly finished her work and was ready when Helen buzzed her to say that Demos was waiting.

The dependable driver sprang to open the rear door of the limosine as soon as he saw Larissa step out of the office building. She returned his greeting, but her smile died on her lips as she saw Anthony comfortably settled in the backseat, motioning her in. She should have known he wouldn't give up so easily.

"Thought you'd like some company, so I invited myself along," he beamed, rubbing her thigh familiarly as Larissa got in. Her only comfort was the knowledge that the docks were only a few miles from the center of town.

As they rode along Anthony moved closer to her and laid his arm heavily across her shoulders. She could tell from the anise scent of the liquor ouzo on his breath how he had spent his afternoon and hoped that Demos would make

record time getting to the docks. When Larissa tried to move his arm away, he only tightened his grasp, planting a hot, wet kiss on her tightly pursed lips. Furiously she pushed him away.

"Behave or I'll ride in front!" she threatened.

Anthony gave a bewildered shrug as if he were unaware of any wrongdoing. "I am the boss's son," he reminded her.

"All the more reason to keep your distance from the hired help," Larissa snapped back. Unwillingly he released her, but continued to sit too close for comfort. It was a short but awkward trip, and she sighed with relief when they pulled into the busy port.

"Thank you, Demos," she said as he came around to help her out of the car. Larissa peered back in at Anthony to tell him goodbye, but he was already out the other door. "Goodbye, Anthony."

"Goodbye? Nonsense! I wouldn't leave you alone here on these docks. Besides, you'll need directions back to town."

Larissa's heart sank further as she heard Anthony dismiss Demos. "Larissa will give me a ride back to the city. Right, *mon cher*?" Knowing protest was useless, she nodded slightly to Demos.

Her little blue MG had come through beautifully on the freighter, and it would have been sheer pleasure for Larissa to drive it back to her apartment—alone. Anthony's presence spoiled that treat. He said little but kept touching her and toying with tendrils of her auburn hair. As they got closer to the center of Athens he said, "Guess this is when I ask, 'your place or mine.'" He arched one eyebrow suggestively and answered his own question before Larissa could retort. "Mother's at home, so it'll have to be your place this time."

"No!" Larissa was firm. "I'll drop you at your house. Friday's the end of the

month and I still have a lot to do. Now if you could direct me, please. I wasn't paying much attention the other night when I came to dinner."

Anthony sat calmly back in his seat and began directing. However Larissa wasn't fooled. She had learned that when he gave in this easily he usually had another scheme in mind. Sure enough, he directed her straight to her own apartment! Larissa kept right on driving. He shot her a wary glance but she said nothing. The one route she had learned by heart was the way to work, and so she took Anthony to Olympus and pulled up outside the front door. "Thank you for your help and for the excellent directions, Anthony. Isn't this where you left your car?"

"Yes, but..."

"If you have any other problems, I'm sure the security guard could be of help. Goodnight." Anthony caught her meaning and slowly got out of the car.

"Goodbye," he mumbled with anger flashing in his eyes. Larissa shivered as he walked away, sensing that Anthony had suddenly become her foe and a dangerous one.

The end of the month came two days later, on a Friday, and Larissa hurried to work, eager to complete the accounting on the remaining records Thanasi had promised to have ready for her. Dropping her briefcase on her desk, Larissa called "good morning" to Helen through the open door and asked if Thanasi had arrived.

"Not yet, but he should be here soon," Helen responded and then added, "You have a call on line two from a Mr. Poulis."

Larissa looked puzzled. "Who's Mr. Poulis?"

"I don't know. He said it was personal."

Larissa closed the office door and then

picked up the phone. "Larissa Michaelis," she replied.

"Miss Michaelis, My name is Alex Poulis and I'm with Athens Indemnity Company. I apologize for telling your secretary that this was a personal call, but it seemed to be the only way to insure being put through to you."

"I don't understand."

"One of my adjustors has repeatedly tried to contact you, but his calls have always been routed to Mr. Lignos. Unfortunately, Mr. Lignos never seems to have the information we need and my company will not settle on these corporate claims until some discrepancies are clarified."

"What discrepancies are you talking about?"

"As you know, on this last claim where the warehouse was burned, your company filed for \$1,500,000 in damages." Larissa did *not* know, but she wisely stayed silent and let Mr. Poulis keep talking. "That figure would of course be accurate if the warehouse had been fully stocked as your company claims. However, our investigator's report has shown that there were only a few barrels of olive oil in the building when it burned. We must have copies of your inventory records so that we can make an acceptable settlement."

Larissa had never seen the insurance claim files, and with Thanasi's chaotic record keeping, it was no wonder that he could not provide the insurance adjustor with an inventory report. She could only hope that the necessary information would be somewhere in the remainder of the material that Thanasi was to turn over to her later today.

"I'm sorry you've had trouble getting this information, and I appreciate your call. I'll do what I can to get those inventory reports to your office by Monday," Larissa said with more confidence than

she felt.

"I hope you'll do that, Miss Michaelis. It's really your company's loss if you can't produce the documents. Good day, and I'll look forward to hearing from you."

"Thank you, Mr. Poulis. Goodbye."

Larissa felt her hand grow clammy as she hung up the phone. She could not conscience a loss like that for Olympus, for Theodor, or for Thanasi. Then cool logic replaced her panic. Thanasi may be disorganized, but he was no fool. Together they would straighten this out. She went to wait for him in his office.

"Mr. Lignos!" she said tersely when he walked in a few minutes later.

"You must have something very important on your mind if suddenly I'm 'Mr. Lignos.' Don't tell me you're after a raise already," he grinned.

"Hardly," Larissa replied stonily, and Thanasi's smile quickly vanished as she continued, "I just got a call from Mr. Poulis at Athens Indemnity about our last claim. It seems that they can't reimburse us until we produce an inventory report."

Larissa did not miss the strong oath he muttered under his breath or the open anger that contorted his face. She had never seen this side of Thanasi, but even before she could react to it he was composed and back in control.

"I explained to the adjustor that the oil had obviously been stolen before the warehouse was torched, and I also told him I'd get the inventory to him next week. I'm sorry he bothered you about it."

Larissa kept her face carefully blank, but she was astonished to learn that some of the warehouses were being looted before they were destroyed. "Does Theodor know the warehouses were emptied first?"

"Of course," he said smoothly, standing to usher her out of his office. "Now,

let me find these files for you."

Shortly afterwards, Thanasi carried a stack of files in to Larissa and deposited them on her desk. "The top folder has a copy of the inventory report in it," he explained, "and the rest of these files are the other financials I promised you. You can put the inventory in the mail today and then maybe the insurance people will be satisfied."

"I'll do better than that. I can drop it off at Athens Indemnity right after my lunch date."

"Fine," he said, returning to his own office.

It wasn't long before Larissa met Vasilis for lunch at their favorite cafe where they chose a courtyard table. Halfway through lunch Vasilis leaned across the table to kiss her forehead.

"You're frowning," he observed. "What's on your mind?"

"I'm sorry, my mind is still at the office. The Olympus warehouses are being robbed before they're set on fire. Until I get some papers over to the insurance office they can't settle the claim."

Vasilis's brow furrowed as he considered this, but before he could comment they were interrupted by the water who told Vasilis that he had a phone call.

When he returned from taking his call Vasilis apologized, "I'm sorry. I hate to leave, but I have to." He laid some bills on the table and said, "I'll call you tonight." He kissed her absently and then was gone.

Larissa finished her coffee, climbed into her car, and headed for the insurance office. She found Athens Indemnity without difficulty, and as soon as she introduced herself, was shown into Mr. Poulis's office. Surprise registered on his face. Not only was her presence unexpected, but so was her beauty. He rose and extended his hand, "Miss Michaelis, what can I do for you?"

Larissa pulled the folder from her briefcase and handed it to him saying, "It's what *I* can do for *you*. Here are the inventories you requested. I hope these will clear up the problem."

Mr. Poulis indicated a chair, paged through the report, and then with a satisfied smile said, "This looks like what we need. I wish we had been able to work with *you* sooner."

Larissa inclined her head at his compliment and rejoined, "Thanks, but I hope we won't need to work together on more claim settlements anytime soon."

"Yes, this has been costly for both our firms," Mr. Poulis agreed. "I appreciate your bringing me this information so promptly. I've explained to Mr. Lignos that unless the security at the Olympus storage facilities is improved, my company will have to cancel your policy as too great a risk. Perhaps you might be able to hurry him along as you did with this report."

Larissa managed an appropriate response but her mind was reeling in disbelief. Poulis talked about Thanasi as if he were an incompetent who needed Larissa to nudge him along! And what about this need for additional security at the warehouses. Surely Thanasi had already acted on that. But even as the thought occurred, she realized she had seen nothing in the check registers that related to security systems or additional watchmen.

Larissa was anxious to discuss the security issue with Thanasi, so as soon as possible she brought the conversation to a close and took her leave. Driving back to the office she fumed. Why had nothing been done? She knew Thanasi no longer believed the incidents were accidental.

Thanasi was waiting for her when she returned. "Did your Mr. Poulis find the report to be in order?"

Larissa raised one eyebrow, but chose

not to answer his sarcasm. "He seemed satisfied, but did ask what we were doing to improve security. What *has* been done?"

Thanasi directed her into her office and shut the door behind them. "Do you have any idea how expensive these security systems are?" he demanded rhetorically. "We're in double jeopardy. We can't afford any more losses but neither can we afford the cost of protecting against them!"

The fallacy of his statement was immediately apparent to Larissa, but she did not argue the point. After several seconds of awkward silence, Thanasi offered, "Monday we'll contact some protection agencies and, with this upcoming claim check, we can hire one."

"Fine," said Larissa in a tone of dismissal. Thanasi nodded and left her office. Larissa stared at the stack of files still cluttering her desk, but she was too tired to work on them and decided that they could wait until Monday.

Larissa thought about Thanasi as she guided the car into the five o'clock traffic. He looked so tired and drawn; the sabotage problem had obviously taken a lot out of him. His dealings with the insurance company on both the inventory and security issues were puzzling, and Larissa realized she needed to talk things over with someone. Theodor was the person who came to mind, and she decided to call him that night. As she mentally rehearsed what she would tell him, she suddenly remembered that she had no first-hand knowledge of warehouse security. Deftly changing lanes, she headed for the Olympus warehouse by the docks at Piraeus to check out the warehouse herself.

It was dusk by the time she pulled up in front of the building. Larissa got out of her car and tried the door. It was firmly locked and no one answered her loud

knock. Turning from the door, she was startled by a resounding thud that sounded like the toppling of empty barrels. She hurried around the corner in time to see a dark-clad figure scrambling over the barrels and heading into the shadows. Larissa shouted for him to stop, but dared not chase him. The figure disappeared in the maze of buildings, and Larissa moved cautiously to the back to check for signs of forced entry. Just before she reached the door, a thunderous explosion rocked the building. Larissa screamed and dove for cover as debris showered around her. For the first time in her life, she fainted.

An indeterminate time later, she began to feel like she was floating, but when her eyes fluttered open she saw that she was being carried.

Quickly her eyes closed again in protest against the dust and acrid smoke and men milling around, trying to quell a fire that had started. She did not reopen them until her rescuer came to a stop. Then the shock of what she saw almost made her faint again. *Vasilis* was her rescuer!

"*Vasilis!*" Larissa gasped and then buried her face in his chest and sobbed in relief.

When he felt her trembling body grow calmer he asked, "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so. A few scratches maybe."

"Good, then we'll go straight to my place," he said easing her into the safety of his car. "You've been through too much to stay alone tonight."

Larissa silently agreed. As *Vasilis* drove away she took one backward look and shuddered at the sight of firemen still battling the flames that punctuated the night sky. It reminded her all too clearly of her parent's accident. Then, abruptly, she confronted him. "What were *you* doing at the warehouse?"

He was silent a moment and then answered calmly, "I wasn't at the

warehouse. I heard the explosion and saw the smoke on my way back from a client's. When I noticed your car, I pulled over immediately and came looking for you."

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I didn't mean to snap at you. I guess I'm still upset. Thank God you did come." Larissa sighed and leaned her head back against the seat.

"Damn!" *Vasilis's* voice startled Larissa, and she bolted upright.

"What's wrong?" She stared at him with concern and then turned to follow his angry glare. She was shocked to see Anthony's big Lincoln streak past them. "Isn't that Anthony Lignos's car?"

"Yes, but his name isn't Lignos, it's Karras," *Vasilis* growled. "Anthony is Zena's son from her first marriage. Thanasi married Zena only two years ago, so Anthony was not legally adopted." This information, coming from *Vasilis*, perplexed Larissa, but she was too drained to question him further.

Back at his apartment, *Vasilis* led Larissa to the bathroom where he turned on the hot water to draw her a bath. "You relax in the tub and I'll fix us something to eat," he directed, and she made no protest.

Vasilis closed the bathroom door and went to the phone instead of the kitchen. He dialed and drummed his fingers on the desk while he waited for an answer.

"It's me," he finally said softly into the receiver. "The warehouse blew, and Larissa was there." He listened and then answered, "No, she was lucky this time." Finally he nodded and said, "Yes, I agree. We've got everything we need. See you tomorrow." After hanging up the phone he went to the kitchen and fixed the supper he had promised.

Soon Larissa joined him in the kitchen. Even wrapped in his old terry robe and with her still-damp hair curling willfully

around her face, Vasilis found her excitingly attractive. He smiled tenderly, "Feel better?"

"Yes, thanks."

He handed her a plate and a glass of wine and then ushered her to the couch. "Tell me what happened tonight."

Larissa took a deep breath and began. "After lunch I spoke with the insurance man who told me our policy would be dropped if our security wasn't improved. Thanasi was evasive, so I decided to check it out myself. I had just arrived at the warehouse when I saw a man running from the building. The next thing I knew, the whole place exploded and, well ... you know the rest."

"Olympus doesn't pay you enough to play detective," he chided. "You could have been killed tonight!" Then he softened, "Eat your dinner."

She sipped the wine, but only picked at her food. "It's not your cooking," she said regretfully. "It's just that the day has caught up with me."

Vasilis's eyes brimmed with understanding, and he scooped her into his arms and carried her to his bedroom. By the time he lowered her onto the bed and gently removed the robe, she was asleep. He gazed longingly at her golden body silhouetted against the fresh navy blue sheets, and his own body throbbed with desire. As he stood over her, Larissa suddenly whimpered in her dreams. He was struck by her vulnerability, and his need to possess her was replaced by an equally strong need to protect her. Quickly he undressed, turned off the light, and crawled into bed next to her. He enfolded her into the safety of his arms, and Larissa sighed and nestled closer.

Late the next morning, Larissa was awakened by a flurry of soft kisses on her neck and bare shoulders. She met Vasilis's embrace and their passions flared as his hands began to caress her in earnest. Her

body responded and she arched against him, as they delighted in the oneness known only to lovers.

In the aftermath of their love, Vasilis rolled Larissa onto her side and began to sensually massage the muscles of her neck and back. "I'd like nothing better than to stay here and make love to you all day," he murmured, "but I have an important business appointment, so I'd better get moving." He lingered long enough for one more kiss and then headed for the shower. Larissa snuggled back under the sheets and dozed contentedly. When she woke again, Vasilis was already dressed.

"Hi, sleepyhead," he grinned. "I shouldn't be gone too long. When I get back we can go pick up your car." He kissed her quickly and left.

Restless without Vasilis, Larissa decided to dress and get her car herself. She brushed off her skirt, thankful that its dark color made the dirt stains less obvious, but she eyed her blouse with dismay. It was not only filthy, but also torn beyond repair. Larissa sorted through Vasilis's closet and selected a plaid shirt that blended with the color of her skirt. She left the shirt out and belted in tunic style, pleased with the casual look she'd created. After smoothing the quilt over the bed, she called a taxi to take her to Piraeus.

While waiting for her cab, Larissa scanned the morning paper. The bold Greek headlines caught her eye: "Empty Olympus Warehouse Burns." Larissa read the article with growing alarm. She picked up the phone and called Thanasi, but there was no answer. Before she could try again, the impatient taxi horn summoned her downstairs.

Larissa gave the driver the warehouse address and sank into the backseat. Her thoughts were racing as fast as the taxi, and Larissa feared that last night's fire would be the final straw as far as Athens

Indemnity was concerned. Who was responsible, and why hadn't anyone been apprehended? What motive could anyone have for destroying the warehouses when they already had stolen the oil?

The taxi screeched to a halt in front of the warehouse, and Larissa was relieved to find her car undamaged by the explosion. She paid the driver and then settled behind the wheel of her little sportscar. Although she tried to escape the frightening memories of the night before, the charred shell of the warehouse brought them vividly to mind and she was anxious to be gone. As she pulled away from the curb she became aware of the throbbing in her head and the gnawing in her stomach and remembered that she hadn't really eaten in twenty-four hours. She scanned the unfamiliar surroundings but didn't see a *taverna*. She did see a sign for Glyfada and, noting that it was not far, decided to drive to the marina restaurant for lunch before returning to Athens.

As she pulled into the restaurant parking lot, she reminded herself to try Thanasi's number again and to put in a trans-Atlantic call to Theodor as soon as she got back to her apartment. While waiting for her order, Larissa made the call to the Lignos home and this time the line was busy. "I'll try again later," she thought as she returned to her table and began to eat.

The warm food made her feel much better, and she soon pushed her empty plate aside. She felt some of the tension drain away as she watched the sleek sailboats glide effortlessly in and out of the harbor. Larissa wistfully dreamed of sailing away to elude the problems of Olympus, and in her fantasy she pictured the rainbow emblazoned mainsail of Vasilis's boat. Suddenly she came to attention. This was no fantasy! Vasilis's boat was sailing into its slip at the end of the pier. She quickly paid the bill and hur-

ried to greet him.

As she drew closer her steps slowed. What "business" did he conduct on his sailboat on Saturday? Her heart pounded as she considered the awful possibility of another woman, and tears filled her eyes as she saw that Vasilis was *not* alone. However, she breathed a small sigh when the other figure straightened and revealed the large muscular frame of another man. But her relief was shortlived when she saw what the two men were doing. With growing anger and disbelief she watched them unload Olympus International oil barrels from the deck of the boat and put them into a waiting van. As the full implications of the scene struck her, Larissa gave a strangled cry. Vasilis heard the anguished sound and wheeled around to see Larissa run toward the parking lot.

"Larissa!" he shouted, but his voice only served to make her run faster. His face became a mask of grim determination as he turned back to his companion. "Let's finish up here. I've got to go after her."

As she sped along the coast road to Athens in her car, Larissa felt tears of betrayal sting her eyes. Vasilis had used her. His lovemaking was nothing more than a ploy to win her confidence and get information. No wonder he had gained entry to her apartment so easily. He was nothing more than a common crook! Yet a part of her objected—Vasilis was far from common. Even now she could not deny the intensity of her feelings for him, but she ached with the knowledge that to him their relationship had been a sham. Her only consolation was that at last she knew the identity of the saboteur.

With less difficulty than she expected Larissa found her way to the Lignos home. Thirty minutes later she pulled into Thanasi's circular drive and struggled to compose herself. As on her first visit, the door opened before she touched the

knocker, but this time it was Thanasi himself who answered.

"Larissa!" Startled by the look on her face, he demanded, "Whatever is wrong?" as he helped her inside.

His concern caused her shaky composure to slip, and the tears began anew. He awkwardly tried to comfort her and finally she was able to speak. "I know who's been sabotaging Olympus."

Thanasi froze. His eyes bore into hers and his face turned an ashen white, but he kept his voice carefully controlled when he asked, "Who?"

"It's Vasilis Stephanos," she whispered, fresh tears glistening on her dark lashes. "I just saw him unloading Olympus oil barrels from his boat." The tears spilled over, and she barely saw the expression of relief and then fear chase across his face.

Assuming a fatherly role, Thanasi put his arm around her shoulders and led her to the sofa. Larissa had not noticed Zena standing at the far side of the room until Thanasi said, "Bring Larissa a drink, my dear."

Zena handed her a Scotch and then sat in one of the wing-backed chairs that flanked the sofa. Thanasi still could not account for Larissa's agitation. "Why does identifying the culprit upset you so?" he asked. "Did he follow you here? Are you in danger?"

"No, no," sobbed Larissa shaking her head. "Forgive me for crying, but Vasilis and I were... well at least I thought we were... very close friends."

From the way she had said it, Thanasi knew she meant "lovers," and his eyebrows arched in amazement at this revelation. In an even tone he asked, "Exactly who is this Vasilis Stephanos and what has he done?"

Larissa explained in a halting voice, "I don't know who he is anymore, but I've been seeing him since the first week I ar-

rived. He told me he was a consultant, but I see now that all he really wanted was an inside track on Olympus through me. What a stupid, stupid fool I've been." Larissa had placed her unfinished drink on the coffee table, and now she hid her face in her hands, missing the conspiratorial look that passed between Zena and Thanasi.

Thanasi waited a moment and then probed, "What did you say he was doing when you saw him?"

Larissa uncovered her tear-stained face and looked at Thanasi. She spoke slowly to emphasize the urgency and importance of what she had seen. "I saw him at the Glyfada Marina. He and another man were taking the oil barrels from his boat and putting them into a van. They all had the Olympus logo, and I'm sure they were stolen from the warehouse that burned last night because..." her voice faltered, "because I saw him there."

"You were at the warehouse last night?" Thanasi's face registered genuine surprise.

Larissa explained about wanting to observe the security and how she had been caught in the explosion only to be conveniently rescued by Vasilis. "I guess he wasn't through with me yet," she said bitterly, "or he would have left me to die."

"You poor child," said Thanasi cradling her head on his shoulder so that he could mouth a direction to Zena, who nodded. She silently slid open the drawer of the end table and pocketed a container of capsules. "Let Zena show you where you can lie down, and I'll telephone the police."

Numbly, Larissa followed Zena back through the house to a guest bedroom and bath. Zena gave her a cool wash cloth for her puffy, red eyes and then pressed two capsules into her palm. "Take these, honey, they'll help you relax."

"No wonder she can be so detached

and cool," Larish thought wryly as she put the capsules in her mouth. As soon as Zena closed the door, Larissa took the two pills out of the hollow of her cheek and deposited them in the trash. She had never believed in tranquilizers, but did not want to argue with Zena.

There was no comfort in the soft bed. Thoughts of Vasilis crowded her mind, and she half-imagined his firm warm body enveloping her own. Furiously she sprang up. The man had used her, lied to her, committed criminal acts against Olympus, and still she could not stop longing for him. What was wrong with her?

Larissa didn't know how long she had been pacing the bedroom when abruptly the silence was penetrated by Thanasi's angry voice. Distance muffled the volume, but the words were unmistakable.

"Anthony! Where in the hell have you been? I told you not to blow that warehouse!"

Anthony's reply was too soft to be heard, but Larissa had heard enough. She collapsed on her knees, stunned. Anthony had bombed the warehouse! Of course . . . she'd seen him pass in his car. He must have been the figure she'd surprised just before the explosion! And Thanasi obviously knew what was happening. That explained his reluctance to let her handle the financials and improve security. They were all in it together: Anthony, Thanasi, and Vasilis.

Sounds of an intensifying argument roused Larissa, and she silently opened the door and crept down the carpeted hall toward the voices.

"Larissa was there last night! She could have seen you!" Thanasi's words were edged with rage.

"She did see me, but I don't think she recognized me."

"She what?" Thanasi bellowed.

"Keep your voice down, or she'll be out here to see what's going on."

Zena gave a low laugh. "There's little chance of that," she said smugly, "I gave her two of my sleeping pills."

Nevertheless, the voices dropped to a conversational level as Zena continued, "There's too much at stake here to risk Larissa's finding out anything more. We'll have to get rid of her, and Vasilis Stephanos can take the rap for that too."

Thanasi protested but his words were cut short when Zena's honeyed voice cajoled, "Darling, we're so close. Think of our future, and Anthony's. With the money from this last shipment you won't need Theodor Pappas or Olympus International. You'll be a rich man and I won't have to share you with anyone."

Larissa could picture Zena fawning over Thanasi, and seethed as she recognized the devious control she exercised over him.

Now Anthony threw his support to Zena. "Mother's right. I'll kill her, and while Larissa's lover is trying to explain to the authorities how her body came to be on his boat, we'll have time to finish changing the logos on those barrels we got from Pireaus and tell our buyer he's getting an early delivery."

Larissa dared not wait to hear more now that she knew her life was in danger. She eased back down the hall and quietly let herself out into the pool courtyard. Moving cautiously through the evening shadows she slipped around the back of the house and began to make her way toward the front gate. She cursed herself for having left her keys and purse in the living room. Now she would have to take her chances on finding a ride.

Just before she reached the gate, a strong arm grabbed her from behind, and a hand was clamped firmly across her mouth. Another figure emerged and captured her kicking legs. With horror she

saw that she was being carried outside the wall and to the same dark van she had seen earlier down on the pier.

As they drew closer, the back doors of the van were opened from the inside and Larissa's struggling body went limp as she recognized Theodor inside. Her captors quickly released her, and she scrambled into the van and Theodor's arms.

"Thank heavens you're here. Zena's trying to get them to kill me," she blurted.

"Easy, easy," he said patting her shoulder. "No one's going to hurt you."

"But I know who's been sabotaging Olympus!"

"So do we, my dear."

The "we" reminded Larissa of her two captors, one of whom had climbed into the back of the van after her.

"My son Bill called me last night," Theodor continued, flashing a fatherly smile at the man behind her.

Larissa glanced back over her shoulder and drew in a sharp breath. "Vasilis," she whispered weakly.

"Translate your Greek, my dear," Vasilis instructed.

She gave him a blank look.

"Vasilis Stephanos... William Stephen... Bill Pappas."

Larissa looked to Theodor, seeking confirmation. As he nodded and smiled, his arms released her and she found herself gathered into Vasilis's embrace. His hungry kiss was interrupted when the van door opened and the other man announced, "We're ready, Mr. Pappas. My men are in position."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

Larissa was helped to the ground. Her hand held tightly by Vasilis, she walked between father and son toward the Lignos home. At Theodor's knock, the front door opened, and the butler smiled in recognition. His words of greeting faltered when he noticed Larissa and the uniformed policemen.

"We'll announce ourselves," Theodor informed the shaken man, leading the way to the living room, following the sound of arguing voices. Thanasi was addressing a caustic comment to Anthony, but stopped in midsentence when he saw Theodor framed in the doorway. Seeing Thanasi's shocked gaze, Zena spun around, and her hands flew to her lips to stifle a shriek of disbelief.

"I think you know why we're here, Thanasi," said Theodor sternly yet sadly. "We know all about the sabotage and the oil deals with my competitors. Why, Thanasi? We were friends. Why did you do this?"

Thanasi only shrugged weakly, but Zena's strident tones replied, "When you bought out Thanasi all those years ago, he didn't have a family to provide for. Now he has a wife and a son to think of, and he deserves more than a meager pension when he retires!"

"I paid Thanasi handsomely when he sold me his interest in the company," stated Theodor matter-of-factly. "If he had continued to invest his money wisely instead of..." His eyes dropped disdainfully to her heavily jeweled hands and then swept the ostentatiously furnished room.

The policemen walked forward and locked the handcuffs on Anthony and Thanasi. As one moved toward Zena she backed up and spat, "You have nothing on me!"

"I think conspiracy to commit murder will suffice," Vasilis drawled ominously from the doorway.

"But how..." her question trailed off as Larissa answered.

"I never swallowed the sleeping pills you gave me."

Larissa stepped aside as the police escorted Thanasi, Anthony, and Zena to the waiting patrol cars.

Theodor looked around the room one

last time and shook his head. "Come on, you two, let's go. I'm going to ride to the station with the Lieutenant, if you think you can manage without me." He winked at his son and chuckled as they all walked outside. After kissing Larissa's flushed cheeks and hugging Vasilis affectionately, Theodor stepped up into the van and rode off.

Vasilis held out his hand, and Larissa wordlessly dropped her car keys into his open palm. As he started the engine and pulled out into the night, Larissa asked quietly, "Why didn't you ever tell me you were Bill Pappas? Didn't you trust me?"

"It wasn't a matter of trust, Larissa. Father and I suspected Thanasi, but we needed an objective person on the inside to manage the books and to prevent any tampering while we gathered evidence. Neither father nor I could do that without alerting him. We thought the less you knew, the less likely you would be to try any heroics and put yourself in danger. Even so, you almost got killed!"

"So...you followed me to the warehouse?"

"Not exactly. I'd been working with the police, and that phone call yesterday at lunch was to let me know that the warehouse was being emptied. We expected something might happen, so we were watching from across the street. Unfortunately, we never saw anything that indicated they'd planted an explosive.

"Those oil barrels you saw me unloading today came from Thanasi's 'private' warehouse on one of the off-shore islands. He and Anthony stole the oil from Olympus, altered the logo, and then sold it for their own profit. They destroyed the warehouses in an attempt to cover-up their theft."

At last all the pieces were coming together for Larissa. "I'm beginning to understand," she said, "but there's still

something that confuses me. Why didn't Anthony warn Thanasi that you were here after he saw you that night in my apartment?"

"Anthony had never met me, so as far as he was concerned, I was just 'Vasilis Stephanos,' your boyfriend. Obviously I could never pick you up at Olympus because I was afraid Thanasi might see me."

Larissa had been so caught up in his explanations that she had paid no attention to where they were going, and she was surprised to see they were at the marina when he finally stopped the car and helped her out. Silently he led her through the moonlight and onto the deck of his boat, but as he bent to kiss her, she moved away and asked hollowly, "Our first meeting wasn't accidental was it?" Interpreting his silence as confirmation, she gazed out to sea and questioned sadly, "Isn't your assignment over? Why did you bring me here?"

His firm but gentle fingers pulled her chin around until she looked directly into the steady depths of his dark eyes. "No, our meeting wasn't accidental, and yes, my 'assignment' is over. But I was assigned only to keep an eye on you... I fell in love with you on my own."

His admission began to dissolve the hurt, and her lips partly warmly. Before she could utter a word, he placed a finger across her mouth and reminded her, "I still haven't answered your last question. I brought you here because we both love to sail; but the day we sailed to the island cove we consummated a much stronger love... our love for each other. I wanted us to be here on the boat when I asked you to make a commitment to that love. Will you marry me, Larissa?"

Her deep azure eyes glowed with a love that she now knew matched his own, and with joyful surrender her lips met his and she breathed, "Yes, yes, my love!" ♥

Ever Since Eve

When Linda Dawson sets out to catch a good husband for her widowed mother Ruth, little does she suspect that her matchmaking efforts will end up involving them both in a complicated foursome that will forever change her life.

KASEY ADAMS

Linda Dawson smiled to herself. Her plan was working, she observed with delight. Her apartment was literally teeming with eligible bachelors, leaving little doubt in Linda's mind that she would be successful in her efforts at matchmaking. Pausing, she looked around the spacious room for her mother. Alas! To her disappointment, in a roomful of men, her mother had chosen one lone woman to share her conversation. She quickly made her way across the room. "Hello, Alice.

Hi, Mom."

Ruth smiled up at her daughter.

"If you'll excuse us, Alice," Linda said pleasantly, taking Ruth's arm and shepherding her away, "There are quite a few guests my mother hasn't met."

Ruth laughed. "You know, if I weren't so sure of your determination to remain single, I'd swear you were up to something."

Linda feigned surprise. "Mother! Me? Don't be silly."

Her mother looked at her seriously. "Linda, I'm not interested in finding a replacement for your father. I loved him, yes, but now I'm perfectly content to remain single."

"Of course you are," Linda assured her. "This party was just to welcome you to Sacramento and make you feel at home. That's all."

Ruth's hazel eyes twinkled affectionately as she stared at Linda. "Okay. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt this time, but no sugary introductions to men. Understand?"

"Sure. Cross my heart."

Her mother hadn't been the same since she'd been widowed. Singleness was an unnatural state—at least for Ruth. If she wouldn't do anything about her own loneliness, someone else had to. Besides, there was also the financial crisis to consider. It was an act of love to rescue someone, Linda reasoned.

Intent on putting her mother at ease, Linda began to circulate among her guests.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar face captured Linda's attention. It was more his darkly disgruntled expression than his clean-cut features that made her pause and stare. Good heavens, Linda thought, the man looks furious. She quickly made her way to him.

Extending her hand, she said, "How do you do. I'm Linda Dawson. This is my apartment."

A scowl creased his brow. "I see. So you're the one responsible for this party."

Linda laughed, refusing to take his accusatory tone or his menacing gaze seriously. "I certainly am. And who might you be—other than tall, dark, and grumpy?"

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I'm leaving."

Just then an older man and a flamboyant matron approached.

"Linda, darling!" the woman caroled. "I see you've already met my new law partner."

"Not exactly, Ethel," Linda corrected. "We haven't been formally introduced."

"All right. May I present Paul Tanner, the best defense attorney in Sacramento?"

Linda's eyebrows rose appreciatively. "Mr. Tanner. I've heard marvelous things about you from Ethel. I'm very pleased to meet you."

Forced into civility, Paul reached into his memory to comment on the only aspect of Linda's life with which he was familiar.

"Ethel tells me she was a student of yours. Something about a seminar on alleviating stress." His tone was clearly unfriendly, and Linda decided to ignore him for the moment. She turned her attention to the suave gray-haired gentleman waiting patiently on Ethel's left. "And who is your other friend?"

Ethel opened her mouth to answer, but Paul interrupted her. "This is Simon Forbes, a good friend of mine," he said tersely. "Had I known ahead of time the purpose of your party, Ms. Dawson, I would not have involved Simon."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Ethel tells me you're shopping for a new daddy. Don't you think that's a little presumptuous? If your mother wants a husband, she should be able to find one by herself. Personally, I resent being tricked into participating in this farce." He turned to Simon. "Let's go. I'm sorry I talked you into this."

Simon laid his hand on Paul's arm in gentle restraint as Linda spoke. "I, too, apologize, Mr. Forbes. The other men here knew why they were invited, and they came willingly because they're friends of mine. My mother is a lovely woman who would never have agreed to be here had she realized my motive for this

gathering."

"I see," Simon said quietly. "And just which one is she?"

Indicating the tall, slim woman in a soft green chiffon dress, Linda said, "Please, don't feel you must stay."

"And may I stay if I like?"

Linda beamed at him. "I'd be delighted, Mr. Forbes."

"Then I shall. If you'll excuse me, I'd like to meet your charming mother. If she's as gracious as her beautiful daughter, I'm sure it will be a most rewarding experience."

"Well, well," Linda said as Simon walked away. She turned back to Paul. "Your friend is quite a gentleman."

"My friend is a fool, but he's a big boy now, so I suppose he's entitled to certain eccentricities."

Smiling pleasantly, Linda took Paul's arm.

"Come now," she said lightly. "Don't be so..."

"Grumpy?" he interrupted, beginning to smile at her.

A jolt of electricity danced up her arm from where her fingers were brushing his sleeve. He was handsome in spite of his attitudes, and when he smiled at her, Linda experienced a tiny sample of what it would be like to have him look at her as a friend, rather than as an enemy. He must have been deeply hurt to have developed such an animosity toward women, she decided. What a waste of a good-looking man.

Urging Paul toward the hors d'oeuvres, Linda glanced surreptitiously at her mother. Simon Forbes had apparently introduced himself; Ruth and he were smiling and concentrating exclusively on each other.

"May I offer you a drink?"

Nodding, he cleared his throat, then spoke quietly. "Look, Ms. Dawson, I'm sorry I spoke so harshly to you."

Linda laughed softly, then squeezed his arm affectionately. "Don't look so distressed. I do want you to relax and enjoy yourself."

Paul smilingly accepted the champagne Linda offered and said, "I'll try Ms. Dawson."

She looked at him marveling at the change the good humor had wrought in his features. Eyes that had appeared dark and sinister now mirrored the myriad crystal reflections from her multifaceted chandelier like a galaxy of stars in a cloudless night.

Suddenly he had become someone she wanted to know, to talk with, to touch.

"Please call me Linda," she said softly.

All at once his fleeting smile was gone, and his face was once again set in firm resolve. "It doesn't matter whether I call you Linda or Ms. Dawson, because we'll never see each other again after this evening."

Linda's own teaching came to her rescue. The best way to deal with a negative attitude, she had often lectured, was to use a positive, humorous approach.

"In that case, I'd better make the most of every second," she said gaily. "It's not easy to seduce a man within a specific time limit. But I'll give it my best shot." Her light laughter and sparkling hazel eyes put him at ease as intended.

"Who goes first?" Linda asked. "Would you like to tell me all about yourself, or shall I begin?"

"You know all there is to know about me," he said flatly. "I'm sure Ethel has filled you in quite adequately."

"Actually, yes and no. She's told me you're a successful attorney, you love your work, and you put in a lot of overtime. That's about all."

"I see. And you?" Paul asked. "What exactly is it you do?"

"I'm a teacher, and I conduct one-day

seminars in communication, coping with and alleviating stress, and attaining success."

"I see," Paul said again.

"Tell me about Simon. Is he retired?"

Paul stared at her uneasily. "Yes, he is. The poor old guy was good to me in the past, so I look out for him. Tell me about your mother."

"She's a widow. My dad died several years ago, and she needs someone to love, someone to share her life with, someone to care for her in her old age."

"She doesn't look so old to me. She's still lovely."

"Thank you. I guess sixty seems old to me since I'm only twenty-eight." Linda had begun to feel a growing affinity for Paul as he expressed genuine interest in Ruth's life, and she carelessly let her guard down as she spoke. "I thought that in view of her present problems the best thing to do would be to find her someone special."

Paul caught her slip of the tongue instantly. "Problems? Just what are her problems, Linda?"

What sort of horrible things was he imagining. She wasn't about to tell Paul that her mother had temporarily moved into Linda's Sacramento apartment because she had lost her house due to an unwise business venture that she'd been talked into after her husband's death.

"Oh, did I say problems? I simply meant that I hate to see her lonely."

His face had grown stormy again, and Linda held her breath.

"If you will excuse me, Ms. Dawson, I believe I'll gather my friends and leave you now," Paul said, and moved on.

Linda hurried to join him as he reached Ruth and Simon. "Mother, I'd like you to meet Paul Tanner, a friend of my friend, Ethel. Mr. Forbes came with him."

"How do you do," Ruth said, barely tearing her eyes from Simon long enough

to nod at Paul.

Paul cleared his throat noisily. "We really must be going, Simon. I have an early court date tomorrow."

A raised eyebrow was Simon's only reply. Linda saw him take her mother's hands and give them a quick squeeze before he released them. Ruth's cheeks were flushed, her eyes glistening, and for a moment, Linda thought Simon might kiss her.

With a brief bow, he said good night, and Linda watched him walk away beside Paul. Stirring within her was the urge to stop them, to ask them both to stay longer. And she couldn't honestly say whether it was because of Ruth's obvious interest in Simon, or the stirrings Paul had so quickly created within her own heart.

Next morning, Linda was awakened by the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. Paul Tanner's broodingly handsome face was the first image that floated into her head and she shook her curls as if to get rid of it. Then she got up, dressed, and joined her mother in the kitchen.

"He was wonderful, wasn't he?" Ruth asked when they sat down to breakfast.

"Uh-huh," Linda agreed. "I'm still trying to figure out why I found him so attractive."

"Because he's lovely and gentlemanly, and his smile is so warm, so genuine."

Blushing, Linda flashed her mother a lopsided grin. "I was referring to Paul Tanner, but I get the impression you were remembering Simon."

Ruth averted her eyes. "Of course. He's a marvelously sensitive man. Why, do you know what he does on weekends?"

"I haven't a clue. Suppose you tell me."

"He works at a pony ride in Fairfield Park."

"A what?" Linda nearly choked on her

coffee. "He earns his living collecting fifty cents a ride from little kids? Oh, Mom, you can't be serious."

"He doesn't earn a *living* that way, Linda. He's retired. And he doesn't seem wealthy, as far as I can tell, but who cares? I like to think he brings joy to children," Ruth mused.

Linda suddenly felt a surge of panic. So Ruth was attracted to Simon. But for all Linda knew, Simon Forbes might be after what little money Ruth had left.

"Mom," Linda said quietly. "I think you need to be very careful in any new relationship. Perhaps you're right. You'll never find a replacement for Daddy."

Just speaking of her dead father made Linda feel teary. If she hadn't been able to get over her melancholy when she thought of her father, how could she expect her mother to? Perhaps she'd been wrong to interfere in her mother's life, but her realization might be too late.

"I know that," Ruth said slowly. "But I also know that something magical happened between Simon and me last night. You might be willing to overlook the attraction you feel for Paul Tanner, but I'm not willing to let Simon disappear from my life until I'm sure that's what I want."

"Well you're absolutely wrong about Paul and me. There is no attraction there whatsoever."

A small, sly smile curled Ruth's lips as she said cynically, "Humbug."

Paul opened the heavy mahogany door of his office in response to the sharp knock. "Simon! Come in! What can I do for you?"

"I think you've already done it, my friend." Simon settled himself heavily into a large leather easy chair.

"Meaning?" Paul asked.

"Ruth Dawson. She's the woman I've been waiting for, Paul."

"The hell you say," Paul thundered.

"You're crazy, Simon. The woman is personable, I'll grant you, but that gorgeous daughter of hers is up to something. Ruth is in some kind of trouble. I strongly suspect it's financial and that's why Linda's so eager to marry her off."

"Paul," Simon said softly, "just because your first wife was after your money, you can't accuse every woman on earth of dirty dealings. Look what I had with Gwen. There are such rare and beautiful relationships to be enjoyed if you can find them, if you don't stop searching."

Cynically, Paul stared at Simon. "Oh, sure, sure. Listen, Simon, if it hadn't been for you my dear ex-wife would have taken every red cent I had. I owe you for that, and I intend to pay my debts. If you insist on seeing the Dawson woman, I'll have a financial check run on her—on them both."

"Don't bother. It won't change my feelings." Simon rose and walked to the door. "I have to get to the park." He paused. "You should understand a little of what I feel. I saw the way you looked at Linda."

"Nonsense," Paul retorted. "She's a typical schemer. Look at what her plots have done to you already, for God's sake."

Shrugging his shoulders, Simon left without replying.

"Dammit," Paul muttered. His old friend was about to become the victim of the womanly wiles of Linda Dawson. Women hadn't changed since the dawn of time.

And Linda was so beautiful and gracious that she instantly put men off their guard. He should know. It had almost happened to him. Stirrings within him hinted that he had not escaped entirely unscathed.

The balmy spring day caressed her

senses as Linda hurried to keep pace with her mother's rapid strides through the quiet outer reaches of Fairfield Park. She knew her mother was in a hurry to reach the place where Simon had said he worked, but this was ridiculous.

"That's him," Ruth said excitedly as they approached the pony ride.

Leaving Linda, Ruth hurried to the railing. The lady who hadn't wanted anything to do with another man was acting like a teenager with her first crush, Linda mused.

The whole affair was ridiculous. Infatuation was fine if it pushed Ruth into the mainstream of life, but tying herself to a man like Simon was stupid. Oh, sure, he might be good-looking and pleasant company in spite of his obvious lack of funds. Still, a couple couldn't live on love in their later years, as her parents had in their youth.

No, Linda decided, Simon Forbes was not the right man for Ruth.

"That man has nothing to offer you," she told Ruth sternly when her mother returned in a little while.

The look in Ruth's eyes was a mixture of love, dreams, and hopes, and it stopped Linda's lecture cold.

"That man," Ruth said quietly, "is the gentlest, wisest, most wonderful. . . ." She paused and smiled at her daughter's incredulous expression. "I'm going to go out of my way to get to know him, with or without your approval."

"You're really serious, aren't you?"
"Yes."

Linda's intuition told her it would be wise to comply with her mother's wishes, at least for the present. "Okay, partner. Shall we telephone Simon this evening and ask him to dinner later this week?"

"Sounds good to me. While we're at it, how about making it a foursome so we don't scare him off?"

"All right. I think I can come up with a

date for myself, if that's what you want."

Ruth took Linda's arm affectionately. "How about Paul? That way the two men will know each other."

Linda's breath caught in her throat. "Oooh. I don't think that's such a good idea, Mom." She racked her brain for a plausible reason to exclude Paul without telling Ruth he disapproved of them both.

"Why is that, Linda? I sense a nervous reaction every time I mention his name."

"All right." Linda drew a deep and settling breath, "You may as well know the truth. We simply didn't get along at the party."

Her mother threw her a suspicious glance, and Linda had to look away to hide her emotions. No matter what she felt or didn't feel for Paul Tanner, she had to keep him away from Ruth and Simon or he was likely to ruin everything. But the thought of having Paul over for dinner *had* thrilled her, she had to admit. For some inexplicable reason, the man had gotten under her skin, and she yearned to see him again. She had never dreamed, when she planned the party, that things would grow so complicated.

"You go on home" she told Ruth. "I have to stop by my office and check up on a couple of things. See you soon."

Back in her office, a half an hour later, Linda hung up from a phone call with Ethel Winchester and sighed happily. She was glad that she'd called her old friend for the scoop on Simon. Now Linda felt that everything was going to be all right.

Ethel had told her that Simon Forbes had been a senior partner of Jones, Forbes and Daley, the firm which Paul Tanner joined when he passed the bar. The man was extremely rich and had recently lost his wife of thirty-four years.

Linda was beginning to realize how beautifully her mother's infatuation fit into the romantic scenario Linda had

created in her busy mind.

Simon was out on his second-story balcony tending two thick T-bone steaks sizzling over hot coals when his telephone rang.

Paul Tanner set a bowl of fresh lettuce and cherry tomatoes on the table and lifted the receiver. "Yes?"

"Mr. Forbes," Linda began, "this is Linda Dawson, Ruth's daughter. We met last night, remember?"

Paul's grip on the phone tightened. He held his reactions in check and listened. "Yes."

A strange uneasiness stirred in Linda's subconscious. "Is this Mr. Forbes?"

"No."

It took her only a fraction of a second to realize whom she was talking to. "Paul? Is that you?"

"Yes," he said. "How are you, Linda? 'It's nice to talk to you again, even if you didn't intend to call me.'"

"Thanks," Linda said, pleasantly surprised at his friendly tone of voice. "Is Simon there? We were wondering if he could join us for dinner Wednesday evening."

"Oh, I don't know. We usually go bowling Wednesday nights. The old boy really looks forward to it."

Simon halted quietly behind Paul, placed the platter of steaks on the table, and said, "The old boy looks forward to what, Paul?" He held out one hand. "Give me the phone."

Linda heard the clatter of a fumbled receiver, then, "Hello Ruth?"

"Uh, hello, Mr. Forbes, this is Linda," she said brightly.

"Hello Linda, nice to hear your voice! What can I do for you?" He stared at Paul: "I certainly hope Paul hasn't been lecturing you."

"Oh, no. Not at all. Paul was very pleasant. As a matter of fact, we were just

discussing having you over for dinner. Are you free on Wednesday evening?"

"Wednesday is fine. We'd be delighted."

"We?" Linda squeaked. It was obvious that she hadn't made her intentions clear to Simon. Damn. How was she going to get out of this!

"Uh, fine," she said. "I'll look for you around seven. May I speak to Paul again?"

Smirking beneath raised eyebrows, Simon offered the phone to Paul.

"Me?" Paul whispered. "She wants to talk to me?"

With an affirmative nod, Simon left the room. "You wanted to speak to me?" Paul asked.

"Yes. This is rather awkward, but Simon misunderstood my invitation. He thought I meant to include you, too." She swallowed hard. "Surely, you understand. I hardly know you."

"And you're embarrassed? Don't be. I'd be honored to join you and your mother for dinner."

No! Linda wanted to scream. No, that's not what I meant. But she realized she had no way out of this embarrassing situation.

"All right" she said at last. "Then we'll expect you both at seven. Please dress casually. We just want to have a nice relaxing evening."

With Paul there, she admitted silently, there wouldn't be anything relaxing about it for her. Well, Wednesday evening promised to be quite an occasion.

Paul was much more attractive than she had remembered, Linda marveled, watching him during dinner two nights later.

Helping Ruth clear the table, Linda followed her to the kitchen.

"Okay, I think it's time for me to go," Linda whispered. "How long shall I keep

him away?"

Ruth placed her fingertips over her lips to stifle a giggle. "About three weeks should do it."

"Very funny." Linda grimaced. She tied the arms of her lavender sweater over her shoulders, picked up her purse, and drew a deep breath. "Wish me luck," she said as she walked out into the dining-room.

"Dessert will be a little late, gentlemen," she said. "We've forgotten the whipped cream, and Mom's strawberry pie isn't nearly as good without it."

Simon rose immediately. "Let me go get you some."

"No, no. I was supposed to pick it up on the way home from work. It's my fault, so I'll go." Now comes the tricky part, she reminded herself. "Would you like to come, Paul? It's a lovely night for a walk."

Paul was caught by surprise. "Well, I wouldn't like to leave Simon all alone," he stammered.

"Don't worry. I won't be alone," Simon replied. "Ruth will keep me company."

Leaning over as he stood, Paul muttered, "That's what I was worried about."

Linda hooked her arm through his. "Simon's a big boy. He can take care of himself."

She hurried Paul outside before he had time to change his mind. Crossing Second Street, they walked briskly along Promenade, then entered the western end of Fairfield Park.

"What about the whipped cream?" Paul reminded her. "Or was that just a trick to get me away from your mother and Simon?"

"I wouldn't call it a trick," she said blithely. "I would call it a damn good excuse, however."

Paul shook his head, then laughed

heartily. "Well, you're forthright about it."

Linda laughed too, suddenly feeling lighthearted. "Come on over to the playground with me," she said. "I feel like playing on the merry-go-round."

His hesitation was shortlived. "OK, I'll push you," he said.

"It's a deal," Linda agreed happily. "Race you!" Her momentum carried her onto the round platform and started it spinning.

Paul waited until she had gone full circle before he grasped the upright bar behind her and began to push. Sand flew beneath his feet as he drove the small slanted platform faster and faster. Then, suddenly, he jumped up beside her.

Linda drew in her breath sharply. Closing her eyes, she let the cool evening breezes flow across her skin while she fought to ignore the sensations Paul's closeness was creating. It was no use. Visible or not, his presence was impossible to overlook. Tiny goose bumps rose on her bare arms, and she shivered violently.

Still grasping the bar with one hand, Paul encircled her shoulders with his free arm. "Are you cold?"

She nodded. "A little."

The merry-go-round was losing momentum. "Would you like to get off?"

Linda opened her eyes and looked boldly into the dusky depths of his. "No," she said softly. "I like it here."

Her lips were moist and trembling, their pale pink tint perfectly complementing her flushed cheeks and glowing hazel eyes. Paul knew he shouldn't contemplate kissing her, yet that was exactly what he found himself doing.

Linda watched him bend closer, saw his lips part and soften, and prayed he wouldn't change his mind at the last moment.

The kiss began softly, then deepened. Linda moved closer as her arms crept

around his neck. At last the merry-go-round halted, and Paul tugged her to her feet and enfolded her in his strong embrace, his mouth growing more demanding.

She could hear the pounding of her own pulse echoing in her ears while Paul's thundering heart beat a similar cadence. Breathlessly, she started to pull away.

"Paul, no," she whispered.

Breathing hard, he held her at arm's length. "I'm sorry. It just seemed to be the thing to do at the time."

"Yes." Linda smiled feebly up at him. God, he was handsome, she thought. No wonder she had lost herself so easily in his arms, in his kiss.

Her knees were weak, but she managed to conceal her unsteadiness. "I think it's time we got that whipped cream, don't you?"

The fire in his eyes told Linda how close she had been to losing the upper hand, and it frightened her. Always before, she had controlled the situations in her life—controlled the *men* in her life. But Paul...

"I think it's time we got the hell out of here," he said gruffly. "It's not safe."

In the days that followed, the courtship between Ruth and Simon intensified. Paul, however, did not call nor accompany Simon on the couple's many dates, convincing Linda that he was simply uninterested in her.

So she was surprised when he turned up at one of her seminars on communication and stress. Linda was stunned to see him among her other students in the auditorium. Although her heart responded wildly to his presence, she managed to hide her emotions and to address him with a smile.

Soon, however, it became clear that Paul had come there to spy on her and ridicule her work. He made a few snide

remarks, and then, looking thoroughly bored and contemptuous, slipped out in the midst of the seminar.

Although Linda was angry and hurt by his behavior, she was too astute a teacher not to suspect that Paul's lack of manners was perhaps a facade hiding his vulnerability.

"Something I said must have disturbed him enough to make him head for the door," she told Ruth over tea that evening, after first expressing her anger at his behavior.

"Many people hide any part of themselves they feel may be vulnerable," Ruth responded. "It's a normal reaction. Why should Paul Tanner be any different? He is human, you know. But you're seeing him in a prejudicial light—because of your personal feelings toward him."

"Whoa! What feelings?"

Ruth stared at her daughter. "I'm not sure. You do seem to have a strange attitude toward him, and I can't understand why. On the two occasions I've met him, he's been a perfect gentleman."

Pondering Ruth's words, Linda shrugged. Her emotions did run at a fever pitch where he was concerned. Chagrined, she acknowledged her failings. "I guess you're right. Paul does seem to upset me. I suppose it has something to do with our personal chemistry, or something."

"The 'personal' part is the key, if you ask me. Give him a break, Linda. He deserves it as much as the next guy."

But he isn't a bit like the next man, Linda answered in the privacy of her innermost thoughts. If there is one thing Paul Tanner *doesn't* do, it's conform to the norm. He's far more appealing than any ordinary man, her psyche added, much to her discomfiture. Far more appealing.

"I doubt this is the best time to have a little chat with you but I need to," Ruth said, interrupting her reveries.

"Sounds ominous," Linda quipped, raising her eyebrows. "Shoot."

Taking a deep breath, Ruth blurted, "Simon has a cabin at Lake Tahoe. He wants me to go with him there next week."

Linda's teacup clattered against the saucer as she replaced it on the table. "What?"

"Well, don't look so shocked. These aren't exactly Victorian times, you know."

"But, you hardly know the man!"

"I know him well enough. I also realize Simon may think less of me if I blithely walk into his arms without a second thought. That's why I need your help."

"My help? What for?"

"I want a chaperon. You."

"Oh, good grief, Mom. That's ridiculous. What could I do. I'd just be in the way. Besides, I can't leave my work anytime I please." Linda saw Ruth's expression droop and immediately softened.

Rising from her chair, Linda made her way to her study to check her calendar.

"How about Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of next week?" she asked when she returned to Ruth.

"Really? You'll go?"

"Yes, I'll go. What kind of a daughter would I be if I let my poor old mother run off with some graying Don Juan without trying to protect her?"

Ruth blushed "Not too much protection, okay?"

Laughing, Linda hugged her. "Phone the man and get it settled, will you? I have calls to make once your plans are set."

Ruth beamed and dialed Simon's number. "Hello, Simon. This is Ruth. I've worked out a way for us to go away together. How about next Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday?" She covered the receiver and spoke to Linda. "He says that's fine."

Ruth's attention was drawn back to the other end of the line. "You what? Oh. Well, no, I don't mind. Actually, that should work out marvelously. I was planning to take Linda, too."

"Too?" Linda hissed. "What do you mean, too?"

"All right, Simon," Ruth crooned. "I'll be waiting to hear from you. Bye." As she hung up the telephone, Linda accosted her.

"Okay, now, what's going on?"

"Oh, well, nothing much. Simon realized I was uncomfortable with the idea of being up there alone with him, so he also invited a guest."

Linda was beginning to feel apprehensive. "He's taking Paul, isn't he?" she asked, trembling inside.

Ruth nodded. "It will be better that way. Simon's thrilled you're going, so Paul won't be an extra person. You'll have each other."

"Oh, save me," Linda wailed.

Patting her daughter's shoulder, Ruth spoke softly. "I doubt that will be necessary, dear. You'll do fine."

Fine? Linda thought. Oh, sure, providing Paul never looked at her, never stood too close, never accidentally touched her. How on earth was she going to make it through three full days in his presence?

On Tuesday, Paul and Simon picked them up early in the morning. The drive to Lake Tahoe was tense for Linda and Paul, while Ruth and Simon were perfectly happy in the backseat.

Paul's manner was polite but reserved, and Linda had the distinct impression that he was dreading this outing. She, on the other hand, was not at all unhappy about being with him. She was determined to keep an upbeat attitude, even when, after a brief conversation, they both decided

they had nothing in common.

The cabin was more of a rustic lodge than the small building Linda had expected. It boasted a large living room dominated by a natural stone fireplace, a luxurious kitchen, and two bedrooms upstairs, each with its own bath. Despite the crisp, cool mountain air, the reds, browns, and yellows of the rooms made them seem warm and inviting.

While Simon showed Ruth around, Linda went outside to help Paul with the luggage. She reached for one suitcase but Paul had intended to carry the bags himself, and he closed his hand over Linda's to stop her from lifting the luggage. "I'll get this one."

Wide-eyed, Linda stared at him. They had both bent over to grasp the handle, and their faces were mere inches apart. She felt the warmth of his breath fanning her cheek. Moreover, she couldn't let go until he did.

His strong fingers clasped hers with a steady yet gentle pressure, and he returned her stare boldly. The fire in her eyes reflected his latent desire.

God, she was beautiful, Paul thought. Why had he allowed Simon to talk him into this trip when he knew how hard it would be to keep his distance from Linda in such close quarters? It was all he could do to force his fingers to release hers when he saw her lips soften and tremble.

Linda watched his features harden as he began to resist what they were both feeling. She wanted to throw her arms around him and press herself shamelessly into his embrace—to touch and be touched. Her eyes misted sadly when she realized Paul had his defenses firmly in place.

Coldly, he glared at her. "Sorry. How clumsy of me."

"No problem," Linda said, feigning a lack of interest. Inwardly, she felt like screaming. The man was maddening! He

was like ice. The professional side of Linda wondered about Paul's past, the events that had shaped him so forcefully. She might be better able to cope with his moods if she could garner a few facts from his casual conversation.

But why try? she asked herself.

Because she cared for Paul Tanner, she finally admitted. No matter how he felt about her, she cared deeply and personally. Linda groaned inwardly as she realized how much he already meant to her, how very close she was to falling in love.

That evening, after Linda and Ruth said their goodnights, Linda tossed restlessly under her covers. The day had been pleasant enough, she supposed, under the circumstances. She and Paul had conversed when necessary, and she had tried to keep their contact light-hearted, but she sensed he still felt uncomfortable around her. Consequently, he treated her defensively. If he continued to be so taciturn, Linda wondered how long she would be able to maintain her cheerful attitude. At some point, she would have to meet Paul on his own terms and force a confrontation.

Suddenly, a rustling noise distracted her. Moving very slowly, she peered from beneath her quilt. Ruth's bed was empty.

Linda sat bolt upright just in time to see the bedroom door silently ease closed. Her first thought was that perhaps her mother was ill, or hungry. A pile of nightclothes on the opposite bed told Linda the truth: Ruth had gotten dressed to sneak out, and Linda had little doubt that Simon was doing the same.

Well. Whatever they were up to, it was none of her business. She heard the front door latch; then the cabin grew totally silent. Wrapping her arms around herself, Linda sighed. It was wonderful that Ruth was so happy that she had finally found someone to love, but Ruth's happiness

made Linda intensely aware of the inadequacies of her own life.

Suddenly, a guttural roar reached her from the other bedroom.

"Oh, boy," she muttered, "here comes trouble." If Paul meant to upset Simon's plans, she knew she would have to dissuade him for Ruth's sake.

She stepped out into the hall, just as Paul came out of his room. His expression was as dark as his hair. Ignoring Linda, he tried to step around her.

She blocked his way. "Stop right there," she ordered. "Where are you going?"

"Out."

"I won't allow that."

"You won't? What right do *you* have—"

"What right do *you* have to interfere in Simon's love life? Who made you his guardian?"

"I'm his friend."

"Terrific. If this is how you treat your friends, I'm glad you dislike me so."

A look of puzzlement flashed across Paul's face. "What are you talking about? What have I ever done to you?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing," she shot back. "That's the problem. You run around with an enormous chip on your shoulder and expect everyone to scurry out of your way. Well, I won't. Not anymore." Linda flung her arms wide, blocking his descent. "If my mother and Simon want to sneak off together, that's their prerogative. Now, go back to bed like a sensible man."

"I will not. If you think for one minute I'm going to let you and your mother make a killing at Simon's expense, you're sadly mistaken."

"Do what?" she squeaked. "Your imagination is working overtime, Paul Tanner."

He gazed down at her as if noticing her

state of undress for the first time. A blush warmed his cheeks. "You are right about that. If you won't move," he said huskily, "then I'll move you." His hands grasped her waist, and he started to lift her off the floor. Freezing in mid-motion, Paul held her at arm's length while his eyes delved into the golden depths of hers.

There was no way Linda could have made herself look away, even had she wanted to. And she had no desire to break the fragile contact of their souls. . .

Slowly, instead of moving her aside, Paul drew her closer. Placing her hands on his shoulders, Linda watched his struggle, saw him agonize over his choices, then saw him lose the battle with himself as his lips descended to her upturned face.

Tenderly, Paul kissed her forehead, her temples, her closed eyes, and finally her lips.

Linda gasped when his hands drifted low on her back, cradled her, and lifted her against him. She was as much his as if he had already claimed her, she realized. A haze of emotions swirled around her, carrying her still higher, closer to the ultimate belonging she knew Paul wanted as much as she did.

Paul hesitated. Breathing hard, he loosened his hold on her. "I still care about Simon," he whispered against her hair.

Linda struggled to interpret his meaning. "I know," she said, "I know." It was perfectly understandable for him to be concerned for his friend, despite this passionate encounter—wasn't it?

"There—there's nothing you can do while he's out, anyway," she said, trying to placate Paul and bring his thoughts back to her.

"There is something *we* can do," Paul said suggestively. "A few more minutes won't hurt."

Linda pondered his words. A few

minutes? Did he consider her a mere dalliance, a trifling thing worth only a little of his precious time before he got back to the matters that were truly important to him? Her self-control returned with a mighty surge.

"Oh, we'd better hurry then!" she said derisively. "We wasted a lot of time already!"

Paul stared at her wide-eyed. "What's the matter? What did I say wrong? I was only—"

"Stop, I don't care what you were only. You've made it quite plain that you don't trust me or my mother. I only hope your friend Simon has more sense than you do." Pushing past Paul, she stomped into her room, slamming her door behind her.

Paul stood alone in the empty silent hall shaking his head. He already knew he wasn't going after Simon. His friend's indiscretion didn't seem to matter anymore. Nothing did.

By the time sunbeams had supplanted the moonlight shining through her bedroom window, Ruth was snuggled in her bed, sound asleep.

Linda pulled a face when she saw her mother's beatific smile. "Ugh," she grumbled. How could anyone be happy after such an awful night? But Ruth's night hadn't been awful, Linda reminded herself. Ruth was in love. Ruth was happy.

With a shudder, Linda climbed out of bed, lecturing herself soundly. Jealousy was self-defeating.

By the time Ruth awoke, Linda had come to terms with herself and her turbulent feelings for Paul. She had no doubt she loved him, but it was evident they had no future together. Her biggest problem, given those facts, was how to raise her sagging spirits and appear unconcerned when she saw him again.

"Oh, good morning." Linda greeted

her mother, when Ruth opened her eyes. "How was your moonlight stroll?"

"You were awake?"

"Yup. And I know you didn't go alone."

"Oh, dear."

"Oh, dear, is right," Linda said. "Be careful of what you say to Paul this morning. He was up, too, and he was livid. He has some crazy idea that you and I are out to ensnare Simon."

"Why would he think that? Simon and I met totally by accident."

"That party was a setup, Mom. I packed it with bachelors to help you find a husband."

"Oh, I know that. But Simon wasn't even invited. He just came, which proves to me that he and I were meant for each other."

"Paul disagrees." Linda put one arm around Ruth and smiled. "I had to throw myself at him to keep him from following you last night."

Ruth's eyes widened. "You threw," she said questioningly, "but did he catch?"

"Nope," Linda said dryly. "He missed." She wanted to confide in someone, to pour out her hurts, but Ruth didn't seem interested.

"That's too bad, dear," Ruth said. "I'm going to take a shower. I'll meet you downstairs later."

"Sure," Linda said, sighing.

A picnic had been scheduled for that afternoon, and it was an elaborately planned affair. Linda tried to help prepare the food, tried to appear interested in going, but she couldn't seem to muster any genuine enthusiasm.

Her mood deteriorated even further when the time came to leave, and Paul was clearly still asleep in his room.

"Apparently, he didn't sleep well during the night," Simon offered, apologiz-

ing for his friend. "We'd better leave without him."

Paul watched them from his upstairs window until they were out of sight. He tried to concentrate on what he felt was his duty to Simon, but he couldn't force his thoughts away from Linda.

His memory rekindled the emotions he had felt the night before. Linda had been so beautiful, so desirable, that he had abandoned his self-control. What else could he have done?

And now he was shocked to realize he wanted her so much he was willing to put down his defenses and try once more. It had been a very long time since he had felt that vulnerable.

Linda followed Ruth and Simon, lost in her own thoughts. But halfway up to the picnic site, she decided she was going to go back and wake up Paul so he could join them. Simon smiled and urged her on.

Slowly, she descended the slope back to the cabin. For once she couldn't think of a thing to say. She felt like an actress about to step onstage without the proper costume, and she was frightened.

What did she want? And what part could Paul Tanner possibly play in her future? The fact that she had stupidly fallen for him didn't change a thing. They were totally unsuited to each other for myriad reasons. Still, something about him drew her like steel to a magnet.

Linda knew she was going back to the cabin to finish what they had started the night before. It was no use denying her feelings, to herself or to Paul. She wanted him, wanted to belong to him, if only for a few hours, and whatever happened after that, no matter how dismal, was not her concern at that moment.

Squaring her shoulders she climbed the wooden steps to the front porch. As she reached for the doorknob, her heart and

mind were filled with one overpowering thought: Paul.

Taking a deep breath, Linda stepped inside and closed the door behind her. She scanned the dimly lit room, and saw the top of Paul's head, barely visible over the back of the couch. He was facing the brightly lit fire, and judging from his lack of motion, Linda surmised he had not heard her quiet entrance.

Tiptoeing up behind him, she gently laid her hands over his eyes. "Guess who?"

Paul started, then cupped his hands over hers, his fingers grasping her wrists. "I don't have to guess," he said tenderly, slowly. "I'd know your touch anywhere."

He leaned back and gazed up at her. All her earlier fears vanished as she looked into Paul's eyes. It was going to be all right. His emotions were running as high as hers.

"Come here," he said, releasing one wrist and guiding her around the couch to his side with his hold on the other.

Linda settled herself in the crook of his arm. "I understand you didn't sleep too well last night."

Paul chuckled. "*That* is the understatement of the century."

"I couldn't sleep either."

"And whose fault was that?" he asked, tightening his hold on her shoulder. "I didn't mean anything I said in the crazy way you interpreted it."

Linda laid her fingertips over his lips, "Shush," she said. "I don't want to talk."

Paul leaned over and sealed her lips with his own. Linda's hand caressed his shoulder, then crept up to pull him closer. This was what she had longed for, dreamed of. Leaning back, she slid down until Paul was lying beside her, their lips still joined in a twisting, churning kiss.

She could barely breath, but she didn't

care. He was hers.

Arching against him, she twisted her head from side to side, her nails digging into his hard-muscled shoulders. "Oh, Paul," she breathed raggedly, "I want you so."

She felt him tense, then shift his weight over her. His eyes were wild and glistening with passion as he began undressing her, then himself.

In seconds he had stripped everything away and covered her nakedness with the warmth of his heated flesh. Linda opened herself to him, searching for the belonging she sensed was only seconds away.

He filled her, body and soul. He raised her to unimaginable heights in swirling clouds of color and flashes of intense light.

"Paul!" she gasped, clutching at him in a frenzy of need. "Oh, Paul, please, now."

As he began to drive harder against her, Linda arched to meet him. Never had she imagined anything as wildly fierce as her reaction to his powerful ardor. Paul was everything—every man—the only other person in her universe. They lived solely for each other. As he convulsed in ultimate pleasure she gave one final cry of pure delight.

Paul covered her mouth with his and drank in her last whimpers and waning energy. Then he collapsed beside her.

"Now *that's* communication," he said, still slightly breathless.

How could she disagree? "Um-humm."

A few minutes passed, and then Paul stood and began dressing.

"Are we done?" Linda asked, "Is that all?"

"I thought it was quite adequate," he said puzzled. "You seemed to enjoy it."

"On a scale of one to ten, it was at least a seven and a half," she taunted. Gathering up her rumpled clothes she turned her

back to Paul so he couldn't see her bite her quivering lower lip.

"Most ladies give me an eleven," he boasted.

"Perhaps most ladies are not as discerning as I."

"I think you're attaching far too much importance to what just happened between us," Paul said. "Remember, you're the one who came to me."

A lump of resentment stuck in Linda's throat. "And I suppose you did me a big favor by condescending to make love to me. Well, big deal. Would you like a letter of recommendation?"

Paul's jaw clenched. "That won't be necessary, Ms. Dawson. What I would like, though, is your promise of secrecy. I'd rather Simon didn't know I experienced a momentary weakness where you were concerned."

"You have it," Linda snapped. "I don't relish the thought of having it known I stupidly fell for you, either."

"The only stupid one around here is me," Paul said as he finished dressing. "Tell Simon I've gone for a drive and I'll be back later—much later."

"That suits me. Don't hurry on my account."

Tears began to trickle down her cheeks as soon as he'd slammed the door. Cursing herself, she blotted them away as she paced the spacious living room. It doesn't matter, she told herself repeatedly. Paul Tanner doesn't mean a thing to me.

By the time Ruth and Simon returned at five o'clock, Linda had almost convinced herself. Almost, but not quite.

"And here I thought you and Paul were having a good time," Ruth observed later. "Simon and I stayed away longer for that reason alone."

"Nope," Linda said, avoiding her mother's eyes. "He had to leave. Business or something."

Ruth and Simon exchanged a meaningful glance.

When Paul returned he was formal and aloof, showing no sign of emotion. He remained so for the rest of the evening, and during the long ride home the day after. Or so it seemed to Linda, who was experiencing acute pain just by being in his presence.

Paul, however, was not as calm inside as he led her to believe. Glancing over at her in the passenger seat, he felt himself tensing up. He studied her profile, highlighted by the golden glow of the morning sun. There was no doubt in his mind that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever known. And today she seemed so infinitely sad, so faraway.

He thought about talking to her, finally deciding against trying to draw her out. If she reacted as angrily as she had the last few times they spoke, they'd probably wind up yelling at each other again.

A sudden sadness pressed for recognition, but Paul refused to acknowledge it, clinging stubbornly to his belief that once Linda was out of his sight he would readily be able to force her from his heart.

Later that evening Linda plopped her suitcase on her bed, and collapsed next to it. The supposedly restful time in the mountains had left her more keyed up than ever before. Now all she wanted was to be left alone, to sink gratefully into the escape of sleep. It was not to be.

Ruth entered hesitantly. "Can I help you unpack?"

No, thanks. I'm so exhausted I'm not going to put anything away. I just want to go to bed."

"Oh, I was hoping we could talk. I need your advice."

Linda sighed. "Okay. Shoot."

"Simon has asked me to marry him. He wants me to run off to Reno with him for the ceremony."

Tears began to trickle down Linda's cheeks. "And you said yes?"

"Not yet. I wanted to talk to you first." Ruth handed Linda a tissue. "You don't seem thrilled."

"It's not that, Mom. I just have some problems of my own right now, and you took me by surprise. I'm sure you and Simon will be very happy."

"I don't know," Ruth confessed, seating herself next to Linda. "I do love him, but I keep remembering your father."

Linda dabbed at her eyes. "So do I. I suppose that's natural. But would you want to leave Simon and look for someone else?"

"Oh, no! He's just perfect."

"Then marry him," Linda said, fighting more tears. "Don't let him get away if he's what you really want. After all, it could be worse. You could be madly in love with a man who's totally wrong for you and doesn't return your love."

The ringing of the telephone cut off any further discussion, and Linda hurried to her study to answer it. "Linda Dawson."

"Has she told you?" Paul's gruff voice demanded.

"Paul," Linda said, "I didn't expect..." A momentary weakness caused her to sit down abruptly.

"All your plans have come to fruition."

"I'm glad they're happy, if that's what you mean."

"You're not fooling me. Ruth is destitute, and you figure Simon can bail her out."

"How did you—?"

"The same way I find out about my clients' guilt or innocence," Paul interrupted. "Tomorrow morning I intend to present Simon with Ruth's financial statement."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because when I face Simon with the

truth, I want to be able to assure him I treated your mother fairly."

"I see," Linda said. "Then I guess I should thank you. Good-bye, Paul." Forcefully, she slammed down the receiver.

Her hand rested on the telephone while she racked her brain for a countermeasure that would salvage Ruth's honor. Paul was clever, but he had made one crucial mistake. He had given her nearly twelve hours in which to act.

Immediately she called Simon and arranged to meet him right away at the pony ride. Then she wrote a cryptic note to her mother and handed it to her as she left the apartment.

"I have to go out for a little while, Mom. I'm meeting someone in the park. Promise you'll wait until nine-thirty to read this note."

"Okay. I must say, for someone who was so tired, you've certainly gotten your second wind. That telephone call must have really inspired you."

"It was Paul Tanner," Linda said dryly. "He has a way of stirring up my life, that's for sure."

Simon was waiting beneath a glowing yellow light when Linda arrived.

"What's the problem, Linda?" Simon said, concerned.

"Paul just called me. He's upset about your marriage plans and intends to show you a financial statement, that will reveal that my mother recently lost her property."

Simon smiled. "Ruth told me already. She didn't want me to find out some other way and doubt her motives."

"You mean you don't care?"

"Oh, I care all right. I care so much that I'm going to use legal means to help Ruth recoup some of her losses."

Linda threw her arms around Simon's neck and hugged him tight. "Oh, Simon,

you're a dear. No wonder she loves you so much."

He patted Linda's shoulder. "She loves me, but she hasn't agreed to marry me yet," he said sadly. "I wish I knew what was stopping her."

"She's torn between the past and the present. It's hard for her to realize she can love you and still be true to Dad's memory."

Simon took Linda's hand and squeezed it. "I know. Gwen and I were together for thirty-four years. I probably understand Ruth's dilemma better than anyone."

A woman's voice pierced the darkness. "What dilemma?" Ruth asked, approaching Linda and Simon.

Linda laughed. "I should have known you wouldn't wait till nine-thirty to read my note."

Simon turned to Ruth. "You didn't tell me you were having problems accepting me as your second husband because you're still clinging to your first."

"I thought you two came here to discuss my finances, not my mental quirks," Ruth said icily. "I think it would be best if you both left me alone and let me do my own thinking." Turning, she stalked off into the dark.

"Simon, I'm sorry," Linda said, taking his hand.

"That doesn't matter now," he said. "You go with her so she'll be safe."

"But what will you do?"

"I don't know. I wish I did."

Paul raised his hand to knock, then changed his mind. He had been a fool to agree to visit Ruth on Simon's behalf when the older man insisted Paul owed him a favor. Simon had finally convinced him that he'd acted rashly in suspecting Linda and her mother. After their conversation, Paul realized that Ruth did deserve an explanation from him, plus an apology. And there was no better time

than the present, he told himself. Linda was at work, so her mother would be home alone.

He knocked politely and Ruth opened the door. "Paul, hello. Linda's not home for lunch yet."

"Good. May I come in?"

"Of course, but if you didn't come to see Linda, why are you here?" Ruth asked, ushering him in.

"I came to apologize for doubting you," he said. "When I suspected you might be having money problems, I naturally assumed you were after Simon's wealth."

She laid her hand over his. "Don't be too hard on yourself. You were just protecting your friend."

"I see now how wrong I was to think you could be so mercenary."

"And you thought Linda was in this supposed plot with me, didn't you?"

"Worse. I thought she had masterminded it. I'm afraid I said some pretty despicable things to her."

Ruth nodded. "That explains a lot. Linda's been a very unhappy young woman these last few days. I suggest you tell her how you feel."

"I don't follow you."

"Oh, yes, you do, Paul Tanner. You say you came here to tell me the truth. But I think you should start by telling *yourself* how much you care for Linda."

Paul looked deep into Ruth's eyes.

"You're right," he said slowly. "I do love Linda."

"Then I suggest you wait here for another half-hour and tell *her*, not her mother," Ruth offered. "As for me, I've decided to pull myself together and make Simon happy."

"You're going to marry him?"

"That I am."

"That's marvelous news," Paul exclaimed. "Congratulations."

"Thank you. I trust you'll be able to

come with us to Reno for the ceremony."

"Of course. Would you have any objection to a double wedding?"

"None at all," Ruth said, grinning. "If you're sure that's what you really want." She stood on tiptoe to plant a motherly kiss on Paul's cheek. "Good luck, son. I'm off to see my husband-to-be now."

Paul managed to maintain his composure even after Ruth had gone to see Simon. It would be good to be married to the right woman, he told himself over and over while he paced and waited for Linda.

Finally he heard her key in the lock.

"Mom, I..." Linda froze where she stood, speechless. Paul was the last person she expected to see standing in her living room.

"Where's my mother?" she finally blurted.

"She's at Simon's."

Linda sighed. "Ah, good. I had hoped she'd see the light. Simon loves her, you know." She dropped her purse on a chair and tossed her coat over it.

"I know. He's a lot smarter than I am."

"I tried to tell you *that*," Linda taunted. "Simon's a dear man."

"How long do you think it will take me to convince you I fall into the same category?"

She couldn't help smiling at his boyishly appealing approach. Apparently, Paul had decided to make peace with her for Simon's sake.

"You'll never be like Simon," she said gently, "but you have your good points and he has his."

A small smile lifted the corners of Paul's mouth, and Linda's knees nearly buckled. Why, oh, why, did he have to look so damned sexy? Approaching her, Paul held out his arms. "Truce?"

Instead of falling into his embrace, Linda grasped his right hand in hers and shook it. "Of course. No hard feelings,

Paul."

"No *hard* feelings?" he repeated. "Do you have any other feelings for me, Linda?"

She tried to withdraw her hand, but he clasped her fingers tightly. "I don't know what you mean," she protested. "Please, let me go."

"I can't do that," Paul said. "We have to talk."

"There's nothing to discuss, except perhaps the wedding."

"That was roughly what I had in mind."

He was projecting an aura of absolute love and trust, and Linda found herself growing uneasy in the face of his changed demeanor.

Paul wanted to talk about a wedding, and she had the awful feeling it wasn't Ruth's he wanted to discuss. Needing his affection in the heat of a romantic moment was one thing, Linda reasoned, but committing herself to him was unthinkable. Marriage was for people like Ruth who were suited to it. Linda knew *she* was not.

"No, Paul. Please," she begged. "Don't."

"I have to tell you I love you," he whispered, never taking his eyes from her pale face. "We've been lovers, but we've never spoken of the feelings that really matter. I love you and I want you to be my wife."

Linda shook her head. "No, Paul. No, I *can't*. I don't want to get married. Not to you—not to anyone." She jerked her hand free of his grasp. "Please go now. Leave me alone."

"You don't mean that."

"Oh, yes, I do." Linda's jaw was set firm.

"I don't believe you. What kind of game are you playing now? What do you want me to say?"

"I don't want anything else from you.

If you want to be friends for Simon's sake, then that's all right with me, but that's *all*, do you hear?" Her voice had risen to a high pitch.

"If that's all, then why are you so upset?"

"Stop trying to analyze me," Linda ordered. "This is my apartment and I want you to leave."

"All right, but I'll be back," he said simply. "I won't give up this easily." Turning, he left her.

Pressing her hands to her lips, Linda stifled a pent-up scream. She loved him, yes. But never had she considered marrying him—never! Why did Paul have to leap from one extreme to the other?

The whole situation was impossible. Impossible! She had never run away from her problems before, but now escape was all she could think of.

Scribbling a note for Ruth, Linda stuffed a few belongings into an overnight bag, called her office and asked Susan, her assistant, to take over her Saturday seminar, locked her apartment, and went out to her car.

But where would she go? Linda wondered as she began driving. The memory of tall, stately pines and the brilliant blue-green waters of Lake Tahoe beckoned to her. Simon's cabin! she thought. Of course. He had shown them all where he kept an extra key, and no one would be there to disrupt her peace of mind or interrupt her solitary musings.

Pressing the accelerator harder, she sped toward her quiet sanctuary, toward the only place where she had felt truly loved since becoming an adult.

Later that evening Paul, Ruth and Simon put their heads together to come up with ideas as to where Linda might have gone.

"If I wanted to be someplace, entirely alone, where would I go?" Simon mused.

"To your cabin in Tahoe," Ruth offered. "but you don't think—"

"It's worth a try, isn't it?" Simon said.

"It sure is." Paul was already heading for the door. "If I'm not back by early Monday morning, stop in the office and cover for me, will you, Simon?"

"Of course. Anything else?"

Pausing at the open front door, Paul slipped his jacket on. "Yeah. Keep your fingers crossed."

By the time Paul reached Tahoe, long, cool shadows of evening blanketed Simon's cabin. There was a fine column of smoke rising from the chimney. Linda was there.

Paul took a deep breath, climbed the steps to the porch and knocked on the door.

Curled up in an overstuffed chair in front of the dying fire, Linda was nearly asleep. The sharp knock startled her.

She jumped from the chair and rushed to the door. "Who... who is it?"

Instead of answering Paul opened the door and stepped into the cabin, and Linda found herself face to face with the unshaven, red-eyed rogue he had become in his concern for her.

Linda staggered backward. "Get out of here," she demanded.

"I've come a long way," he said evenly. "I'm tired."

"I don't care, I..." If he chose to be miserable because she had turned down his proposal, that was his problem, not hers, right?

Looking at him, though, tore her heart. His emotions were so evident she felt like crying out in compassion for him, for his pain. She was weakening. Her resolve disappearing. Soon, if she remained near him, she knew she would be in his arms, soothing away his sadness.

No! her defenses screamed. No. Don't be a fool. Loving is losing, not winning.

Run.

She started for the stairs. "This isn't my cabin, and I don't belong here. You do. I'll get my things and go."

"Don't go. We need to talk."

"There is no 'we,' Paul. You and I are two separate people who became unwisely involved with each other in the heat of the moment."

"You don't believe that any more than I do."

She clenched her teeth. "I'm happy with my life the way it is. Marriage doesn't enter into my plans."

"All right," Paul said quickly. "We won't discuss it. We won't talk about the future." He took a step closer. "Tell me you don't want me to kiss you."

"I don't," Linda snapped, hearing far too little conviction in her voice. Spinning, she started up the stairs at a run.

"Stop running, dammit," he cursed, following her. "What are you afraid of? Do you hate me that much?"

Whirling to face him, Linda tossed her head and pushed her hair off her forehead. "Hate you?" she shrieked. "I don't hate you, you dummy, I love you."

Gently, Paul encircled her with his arms. "Then why are you so determined to run away from me?"

Linda opened her mouth to speak, but no words emerged. It was simply too wonderful feeling Paul's touch again. It totally undid her. Racking sobs shook her body as Linda leaned against him, defeated.

He held her close, absorbing her pain, until she began to regain her composure.

She looked up at him through eyes that felt sore and swollen. "I'll bet I look pretty funny," she said.

"If you expect me to contradict you and tell you how beautiful you are, you'll have to stop crying."

"I have stopped," she assured him, sniffing.

Paul shook his head. "What are we going to do, Linda?"

Linda placed a quick kiss on his lips, her arms encircling his neck. She wanted more than anything else to recreate the magical feeling of belonging she had discovered in Paul's arms. It was a foolish desire, she knew, but this was probably the last time fate would throw them together like this—alone and isolated.

"I want to go to bed," she said softly.

Bending down, Paul lifted her in his arms and carried her the rest of the way up the stairs.

The sun had nearly set when he placed his willing burden on the bed in the room he had so recently shared with Simon.

He sat on the edge of the quilted coverlet and took her hands. "Did you mean it when you said you loved me, Linda?"

"Yes, but that doesn't change anything, Paul."

He bent to kiss her. "It does for me," he said.

Linda cupped his cheeks in her hands, drawing his head down to her until their lips met. She didn't want to talk; she didn't want to think at all. Losing herself in the oblivion of Paul's lovemaking was the only escape in sight, and she sought the mindless bliss she knew he could provide.

Paul's lips traveled across her cheek, his teeth nibbling at her ear, before going on to taste the delicious sweetness of her neck.

Pulling away, Linda lifted her sweater over her head in one fluid motion and began to remove the rest of her garments. In Paul's eyes she saw instant approval, and he stood beside the bed to strip away his own clothing.

He rejoined her quickly, deliciously pressing his thigh between hers.

"My Linda," he muttered against her

neck. "My beautiful Linda."

Then he levered his strong body over hers, claiming the gift she so eagerly offered.

As he possessed her, Linda drew him in with every ounce of strength in her lithe body, grasping, holding, accepting him until her passion drove them both to the edge of reason.

With a cry, Linda reached out to Paul in ultimate ecstasy, every muscle in her body vibrating in tune with his.

Then they were spiraling downward together, spent and weary. Linda tried to maintain the feeling of oneness they had shared, but it was impossible. The worst thing about loving someone was preparing to lose them, she thought. Pain was with her already, and he still lay in her arms. What would it be like when they had to part? How terrible it must have been for Ruth to lose the husband she had cherished for so many happy years.

She placed a tender kiss on forehead. "Do you have to hurry back to Sacramento?"

"No," he said, his voice low and charged with emotion. "I'll stay all weekend if you want me to."

"I want you to," Linda told him, caressing his cheek. "Providing we talk only about the present."

"All right," he agreed. "For now we'll do it your way."

And he kept his agreement. The remainder of the weekend was blissful for Linda, spent in light-hearted banter and heart-stopping lovemaking. She hated to see it end.

It was Wednesday of the following week before Linda felt steady enough to discuss the subject of marriage with Ruth.

"Are you and Simon still planning to be married in Reno?" she asked her mother.

"Yes. I've been almost afraid to ask if

you'd be my maid of honor. You haven't seemed too pleased about my wedding."

"No, no. It's not *your* wedding," Linda explained. "It's anyone's wedding. They make me terribly nervous, that's all."

"But, dear, it was your idea, remember?" Ruth teased her.

Linda sighed. "Yes, but Simon's an old man already, mother. How can you open yourself to pain like that again? Losing someone is no joke."

"Oh, you're right about that," Ruth conceded. "But I love Simon. What a waste it would be to spend the next ten years, or even ten days, being lonely when we could spend them together. It makes no difference how much or how little time we have."

"But you can't guarantee you'll be happy, and you know you'll die a thousand deaths if you lose him."

Ruth's voice was gentle, her tone tender as she spoke to her daughter. "To lose someone in death is not the truest sadness, Linda. A far greater loss is to know you have never really loved anyone. I'm afraid you'll miss some magnificent possibilities in your life until you accept that."

"Speech over?" Linda asked, her spine rigid.

"Speech over," Ruth said. "Do you think you'll be able to lay aside your newfound prejudices against a marriage you tried to engineer—and come with us to Reno?"

Linda smiled. "If it's what you want, Mom, I'll be there. I don't understand you, but I wish you the best."

"That's my girl," Ruth boasted, giving Linda a hug.

Ruth went out to do some errands and Linda was left alone to ponder what her mother had said. She tried to convince herself that after the wedding was over, her emotional stability would return and she'd be able to forget Paul.

If Ruth wanted to rush headlong into matrimony with all its accompanying disasters, that was her business. Linda was strong; Linda was her own person. And Linda was smarter than all the rest of them put together. She wasn't going to be hurt.

After the conversation she had with her daughter, Ruth decided it was time she had a talk with Paul. After she'd finished her errands; Ruth called him up and arranged for them to meet for lunch.

An hour later, Paul met Ruth in the garden restaurant she had suggested.

"You once told me you loved Linda," Ruth said without aplomb after they'd been seated and had ordered. "Have your feelings changed since that time?"

"No. But she doesn't love me," Paul stated quietly. "She says she does, but she refuses to discuss marriage, so I strongly suspect her attraction to me is mainly physical."

Ruth folded her hands at the edge of the floral-patterned tablecloth. "Paul, listen to me. Linda was in her early twenties when my husband died, and she was very close to him. The so-called experts say small children have a very difficult time dealing with the death of a parent, but I believe adults can go through some of the same turmoil."

"You believe Linda fears marriage because her father ultimately left you, even though it was through no fault of his own?"

"That's what I have to think after our conversation this morning. Linda tried to talk me out of marrying Simon because he and I may have so little time left."

"Ah, but a few glorious years are better than none."

Ruth squeezed his hands. "I knew you'd understand." She smiled lovingly across the table at Paul. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he confessed. "When we parted company at Simon's cabin last weekend, she acted as if she was bidding me a final good-bye."

Ruth chuckled. "Good. That sounds very promising. If Linda didn't care, if she wasn't struggling to keep you at arm's length, she wouldn't mind whether she saw you again or not."

"Are you sure she feels that way?"

"Reasonably sure," Ruth said. "Here's my advice: Play it cool for the time being and don't press Linda. Then show up at the wedding, looking smashing in your tuxedo. If I know my daughter, she'll come around. That is, if you're willing to be patient."

Paul raised her hand to his lips and gently kissed it. "Thanks, Ruth. I love Linda with all my heart, and I'm willing to try anything."

Paul raised his glass to Ruth. "To love."

"To life, she added.

"And to Linda," he said.

Linda expertly piloted her car through the heavy traffic crowding the compact downtown business district of Reno.

"If I wasn't so scared, I'd be excited by the bright lights and confusion," Ruth said. "Look at all the flashing neon, and in the daytime, at that."

"Just keep your eyes on Simon's car in case they turn," Linda admonished. "You can't get married without a groom."

"You might give that some thought as well," her mother said.

"You bet," Linda muttered. She wasn't going to show her real feelings, no matter what. This was Ruth's wedding day, and Linda vowed no one was going to spoil her happiness or dampen the joyous atmosphere surrounding the ceremony.

Simon had promised to reserve two

separate rooms, one for Linda and one for Paul, plus the bridal suite for Ruth and himself. It was a waste of money, Linda had argued, but he had insisted, even after she had explained that she didn't intend to remain in Reno after the short ceremony, and the dinner which was to follow afterwards.

When they pulled into the hotel driveway, Ruth rushed from Linda's car to meet Simon, leaving Linda to bring up the rear with Paul.

"They look happy, don't they?" Paul asked her.

"Yes," Linda said. "Being together does seem to suit them"

Linda had expected Paul to make some kind of romantic overture, but he didn't. She stared at him, wondering why.

Smiling, Paul feigned innocence.

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no," she said as they walked into the lobby.

His polite indifference jarred her. Ever since they'd met they'd been either hot or cold, never lukewarm. Never casual. She was seeing a new side of Paul, and she wasn't sure she liked it.

He couldn't have changed his personality so drastically in the ten days since she had last seen him. No. The man was putting on an act, probably for Simon's sake, she decided. She wanted to goad him into action. His maddeningly pleasant demeanor unnerved her.

Linda let her mind mutter expletives while she followed Ruth to the elevator.

Standing in the hotel chapel's anteroom, staring at her mother's image in the full-length mirrors, Linda put the finishing touches on Ruth's hair.

"There. You're stunning. Are you ready?"

With a ragged sigh, Ruth nodded. "I'm

scared, honey."

"You can still change your mind, you know."

"No," Ruth said quietly. She flashed a tremulous smile. "This is what I want more than anything."

"Then let's go do it. See you in a minute."

Smiling, Linda left the sanctuary of the anteroom and walked slowly toward the flower-laden altar.

A door on the opposite side of the room opened and Simon appeared. He was obviously as nervous as Ruth, Linda observed, and just as good-looking. They would make a stunning couple.

Linda swallowed hard, fighting her growing emotional unsteadiness, as joy filled her heart and mind. She winked at him and was rewarded by his pleased smile.

Double doors at the rear of the room swung open as the first strains of music began, and her mother appeared on Paul's arm.

A rush of emotion flowed over Linda. Ruth was beautiful, of course, taking on the loveliness that is nature's gift to all brides. But Paul... Paul was magnificent in his tuxedo.

Biting her lower lip, Linda controlled her reactions. She ordered her mind to concentrate on Ruth and Simon; their future, their love. This was their day. Their moment.

And what a beautiful bride her mother was, Linda mused in awed wonder. How ethereal she seemed. Perhaps it was the giving of her promise of love that made the difference in her appearance; perhaps just knowing that that love was returned in full measure by someone who could have walked away yet chose to stay—for life.

A tear trickled down Linda's cheek as Ruth and Paul reached the altar.

Paul handed the ring to Simon at the

proper time, then edged over to stand beside Linda. Silently, he passed her a crisply folded white handkerchief.

"Tears of joy, or sorrow?" he asked quietly.

"Joy," she whispered. "Pure joy."

Paul's fingers gently brushed the small of her back. "Good," he said, so quietly Linda wasn't quite sure she had heard him.

His touch was as much a perfect part of the afternoon as the music, the flowers, or the vows. It was a tenderness Linda needed more than words. She managed to bestow a tremulous smile on Paul just as Simon and Ruth exchanged the kiss that marked the beginning of their marriage.

Linda and Paul followed the newlywed couple up the aisle. Smiles neatly tacked in place, they joined the others in the flower-covered archway reserved for wedding pictures where a photographer was waiting.

Paul stepped up to Simon, patting him on the back. "You holding up okay, Counselor?"

"Splendidly. And you?"

"So far, so good," Paul said. "But this promises to be a long day. When and where should we meet you for dinner?"

"Let's meet here in the hotel dining room, at seven. I have reservations for four." He cocked his head toward Linda. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Paul mumbled.

Finally the ordeal of photographs was over. Ruth grinned happily at Linda and Paul.

"Why don't the two of you go check out the casino while Simon and I move my things to the bridal suite," she said.

Linda nodded. It was almost over. The longest day of her life had only a few more hours left in it. Surely she could manage to hold together that long, she reasoned.

The casino turned out to be crammed, and, after a few minutes, Linda began

feeling claustrophobic.

"I'm not comfortable here," she admitted to Paul.

He smiled and encircled her waist with one arm, shepherding her through the dense crowd. "Let's go for a walk instead," he said. "There's a garden outside, it'll be more relaxing."

Paul's suggestion appealed to Linda. She did need to relax, with or without Paul. The events of the last few hours were starting to catch up to her, to affect her normally steady reactions.

Linda cast a sidelong glance at Paul. His attitude had remained the same since their arrival in Reno. It wasn't unpleasant to be with him, nor was it threatening, only comforting. And right now, she told herself, she was in dire need of all the comfort she could get.

As they entered the cool, secluded garden, Paul indicated a flat stone bench. "Please. Sit down."

Linda expected him to take his place beside her, but instead he stepped around behind the bench and began kneading the stiff muscles in her neck. It felt marvelous.

"Umm. That's wonderful."

"Good. Why don't we try some of your own relaxation techniques and see whether we can get you to calm down."

Laughing lightly, Linda looked up at him, then sobered at his serious expression. "You mean it, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Gee, I had the impression that you felt nothing but contempt for my work," she remarked ironically.

"People can change, Linda," he said gravely. "I read a lot and am willing to see the merit of what you teach. Let me try, please."

She shrugged. "All right. I don't see how it can hurt." She closed her eyes. "I'm ready. Begin."

"Take four deep breaths," Paul said.

He continued to rub her stiff muscles. "This garden is so refreshing. Smell the flowers. They're like the fresh scents that filled the chapel a little while ago. Picture how lovely it was."

Linda nodded. She had utilized a similar technique so often that she began to relax immediately.

"It's a time of happiness," he went on. "And there's someone here who wants to share in that happiness." Paul paused. "See him? It's your father, Linda. He wants to talk to you."

She tried to pull away from Paul, but his grip was like velvet bands.

Bending closer, he kissed her hair. "You know what can happen if you let it flow, Linda. I'm surprised you haven't tried it on yourself before this."

Anger replaced her patience. He had gone too far. "Just who do you think you are, telling me what I should or shouldn't do? I don't need imagery. I'm fine the way I am."

"Are you? Or do you cling to someone's memory so tightly that it has shaped your life with fear instead of the love he intended? What would your father want you to do, Linda?"

That hurt, causing her to retreat both mentally, and physically. Ducking out from under Paul's hands, Linda stood and faced him across the stone bench. Her eyes were dull, her expression blank. "I'm going to my room," she said flatly.

"Please, stay with me." He reached out to her. "Let me help you."

Linda's voice was so unemotional she hardly recognized it as her own. "I don't need anyone's help—especially yours." Turning, she walked back into the hotel.

Linda went into her room, kicked off her shoes, and flopped down across the bed, dangling her feet over the edge.

It would be a pleasure to cry, or to feel angry again, or even to laugh about Paul's clumsy attempt to manipulate her, but

Linda found she wasn't reacting at all. That was much worse.

Staring at the ceiling, she tried to let herself go, give herself permission to think, permission to feel any way she wanted, but all she discovered was an overwhelming urge to take action. Any action.

"Damn," she muttered, sitting up and making a disgusted face. For a person who was supposed to have it all together, she was certainly not behaving rationally. She slipped her shoes back on, picked up her purse and decided to take a walk. She took the elevator down to the hotel lobby, went out of the revolving doors and wandered down the slope to a rose garden by the river.

Gentle breezes ruffled her hair and cooled the day to a refreshing temperature. Linda leaned on a railing, staring into the deep green waters of the Truckee River. The place was deserted, except for a lone man standing nearby. She thought he looked as desolate as she was herself and gave him a small shy smile.

The man walked up to her extended his hand. "Hi. I'm Martin Silverman."

Linda shook his hand, then returned her concentration to the river's gentle flow.

"I suppose you came here for a divorce, too," the man continued. "I can see it in your eyes."

She shrugged. It was clear this man needed to talk, and it certainly wouldn't hurt her to listen to someone else's problems for a change. As a matter of fact, it might help her get her mind off Paul.

"Where you married long?" Linda asked.

"Six years." He was wringing his hands. "But that's not the worst of it. I feel like such a failure."

"Ah, but you shouldn't," Linda said. "After all, some people aren't suited to

marriage."

"Yeah," Martin shed his brown jacket, draping it over the bridge railing. "I guess I can talk about it with you," he said. "You're a stranger, and I'll never have to face you again." He paused nervously. "You don't mind, do you?"

Linda took a deep breath and released it as a sigh. "No. I don't mind. Say whatever you like and I promise it will never go any farther."

"Do you know what I do for a living?"

Looking at his well-tailored suit and styled hair, she guessed, "You're a doctor or a professional of some sort, I suppose."

Martin grimaced. "I'm a marriage counselor."

"Oh my."

"Yeah. Oh my. Can you believe it? I've saved literally hundreds of other people's marriages and I couldn't salvage my own."

Linda laid her hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry. Did you see another counselor?"

"Oh, no. Not me. Not Martin Silverman. He was so competent he didn't need anyone else's help. He could do it all by himself. And he did." Martin held out his arms. "You see the result."

"But surely you knew you were too close to the problem to be objective about solutions." Linda's eyes became glassy, her breathing shallow and rapid. Do you hear what you're saying? she asked herself. Are you listening to all this advice pouring out of you? And what are you going to do about it?

Linda blinked and saw Martin staring at her. "Are you all right?" he asked, concerned.

She shook herself. "Sure. I—I'm fine. I've just had a flash of insight and it's fantastic, that's all."

"I haven't felt

"That's great," Martin commented:

"Do you honestly believe your counsel-

ing helped others?" Linda continued.

"Well, sure, but—"

"Then get yourself some professional help, Martin. Take the good advice you've been handing out for years."

He brightened slightly. "I suppose it might do some good."

Linda was walking away, and he fell into step beside her, carrying his jacket. "Where are you going?"

"To take some of my *own* advice," she said, extending her hand to shake his. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm in rather a hurry. Good-bye, Martin, and good luck."

Once back at her room, Linda placed the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the outside of her door, locked herself in, reached for her telephone, and dialed Sacramento.

"Linda Dawson and Associates," the pleasant voice said. "Susan speaking."

"Susan, this is Linda. I want you to get tape number twenty-seven, put it on the machine, and play it for me."

"All of it? Where are you? I thought you were going to your mother's wedding. Are you all right?"

Linda was exasperated. "Listen, Susan, all day people have been asking me that, and all day I've been lying and saying I was fine. Truthfully, no, I'm terrible. After you play that tape for me I hope to be much better, though."

"Okay," Susan sighed. "From the beginning?"

Linda stretched out on the bed, cradling the receiver. "Yes," she said. "I think it's about time I began listening to my own good advice."

Linda's pillow was wet, her cheeks tear-stained, by the time her teaching tape drew to an end. Exhausted, she lay quietly on the bed, then reached over to place the telephone receiver in its cradle. Listening had been painful.

Rubbing her temples, she searched her

heart for signs of leftover bitterness. There were still touches of the ache she had held onto for so long, but her recovery had definitely begun, she noted with relief. Time would do the rest.

As for now, Linda thought, she had two clear choices. She could either continue to lie there and possibly escape into sleep, or she could rouse herself, repair the ravages of her weeping, and go downstairs to join Ruth and Simon for dinner.

And Paul, she added quickly. Don't forget Paul. As if she could, she grumbled wryly to herself.

Twenty minutes later, she joined Ruth and Simon in the restaurant.

Simon stood as she approached. "Oh, good. We're so glad you could join us." He looked past her. "Where's Paul?"

"I thought he'd be with the two of you."

"He was, dear," Ruth said. "The last we saw of him, he was going to look for you."

"He found me, but I ditched him," Linda confessed. "I needed to be alone for a while. Unfortunately, I haven't seen him since."

"Well, he'll show up sooner or later, Simon said."

But Paul never did show up. Linda was upset, but an idea had slowly formed in her head. By the time dinner was over, she was ready to act.

"I'm going to leave you now and find Paul," she announced.

"Where will you look?" Simon asked.

"I don't know yet. I'll wander around the hotel till I spot him. Wish me luck?"

"The best," Ruth said.

The casino crowds were twice as thick after dark. Finding Paul in a mob like that was going to be nearly impossible, Linda decided. But she was going to search until she found him if she had to stay up all

night. That was all there was to it. End of discussion.

Stained-glass panels framed the door to one of the hotel bars. The beautifully vibrant colors drew her attention, but it was the shadowed outline of a man seated in a corner booth that made her pulse race. She recognized him instantly.

Linda breathed deeply. Paul was the one she wanted. No doubt remained on that score. And he must still want her, or he wouldn't have tried to learn her teaching methods in order to help her.

A rush of love flowed through her, and she entered the bar, joining Paul in his booth.

"Hi," she said.

"Hello, Linda." Barely glancing up, he swirled the ice in his drink. "I phoned your room all afternoon, and there was no answer. I trust you're feeling better."

"Much better, thanks." She ordered herself a drink. Then reaching across the table, she grabbed his hand, grinning mischievously. "They tell me you're a lawyer, sir. I have this terrible problem, and I'm in desperate need of legal advice."

A wry smile curled Paul's lips, and he peered at her from beneath furrowed brows. "I see. Go on."

"Well, it's a long, sad story. You see, I met this gentleman—let's call him Mr. A. and I fell in love with him, but I tried to pretend otherwise. He did, too."

"Sounds rather foolish of you both," Paul observed.

"True." Linda's drink arrived. "Anyway," she went on, "Mr. A. finally proposed marriage, at which point I freaked out and stupidly refused. Now we're getting to my legal problem. When I turned down Mr. A.'s proposal, he swore he wouldn't give up, only it seems he has. What I want to know is, can I sue him for breach of promise?"

Glittering roguishly, Paul's eyes met

hers. "Do you want to sue him or marry him?"

"Suppose he's given up on me?"

"But suppose he hasn't. Maybe he's only been biding his time. Waiting till he thinks you're ready."

Linda dropped her role of storyteller and leaned back against the booth. "I think I'm ready now."

Taking her hand, Paul raised it slowly to his lips, kissing her fingers. "I wish I could be as sure as you say you are."

"Have you changed your mind, Paul?"

"No, love. It's not that." The desire in his gaze burned into her. "I'm just afraid you may have been overly influenced by the events of today. I never should have experimented with your memories. I didn't mean to upset you; I meant to help you."

Linda cupped his cheek lovingly. "You did. I can't promise I'll never be afraid of losing you, but I do know what was making me run from the idea of spending my life with you. The old hurt about my father was buried so deep I would have sworn it didn't exist—until you made me see it."

Linda scooted closer to him and Paul put his arm around her shoulders.

"Let's ask my mother and Simon to reverse roles and be our witness," she said softly. "That is, if you don't mind rushing into marriage. I know it's a rather off-beat decision—coming to Reno to attend a wedding and winding up married yourself."

He smiled down at her. "You and I have never done anything in a reasonable or normal manner. Why should we start now?"

"We'll be a great pair, Paul Tanner. Unbeatable."

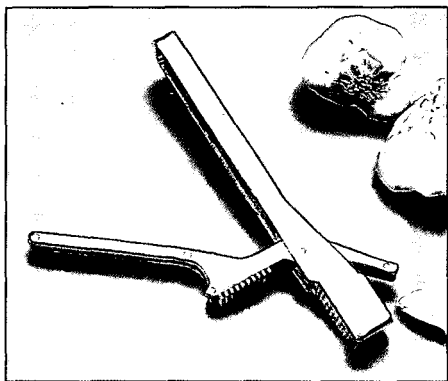
"I quite agree," Paul said as he pulled her into an embrace. ♥

OIL THE FRENCH WAY

Fabulous looking oil can stores up to 1 pint of your favorite oil. A must for every kitchen. It makes an unusual gift for a favorite person and it's pretty enough to use at parties. A compliment from every guest is insured.

98B—Reg—\$8.50

Subscriber's price—\$7.50



SELF-CLEANING GARLIC PRESS!!

Precision-made cast aluminum crushes garlic instantly for all your fine cooking. Just reverse the action for perfect self cleaning. An indispensable kitchen tool.

119— Self-cleaning Press—Reg.

\$5.95 Subscriber's price—\$4.95

CORDLESS MINI-MIXER

This lightweight but sturdy plastic mixer with 4 beaters is made to fit in the palm of your hand! No need to drag out a lot of unnecessary equipment—this marvel lets you whip cream, egg whites, sauces—also great at the bar for mixing drinks! Take it anywhere, it's battery operated (batteries not included).

94A—Reg—\$5.50

Subscriber's price—\$4.75



ORDER NOW!

(Check. Money order. M.C., Visa)

BROOKVILLE MARKETING

158 Linwood Plaza

FORT LEE, N.J. 07024

(Add \$2.00 for postage and handling)

5GR/S086

REPRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For The Woman Who Can Afford To Stay Young!



New advanced COLLESSENCE™ — the most effective formulation of nature's own youth guard, collagen!

We're all born with a rich layer of collagen beneath the seven layers of our skin. By age 25 or so, the collagen is no longer being naturally renewed. As the layer diminishes, the skin no longer has the support it needs to remain springy and supple, and wrinkles accelerate. This is the primary cause of aging of the skin.

COLLAGEN IS EXPENSIVE. Many companies use less than one-tenth of one percent, far

below the level needed for proper effect.

COLLESSENCE™ IS PURE AND CONCENTRATED COLLAGEN. IT'S EXPENSIVE, BUT IT WORKS.

Within only ten days you'll begin seeing results that will astound you. With consistent use, you'll have skin that not only feels and looks younger, but biologically is younger!

Collescence™ is not mass produced to sit on store

shelves and lose potency. Collescence™ is not sold in ordinary retail stores.

If you want to keep your skin young and smooth, order now! Order at no risk.

Call 1-800-233-7534 toll free and charge to your MasterCard/VISA, or send check money order for \$39.95 plus \$4 for shipping and handling to

COLLESSENCE™
212 Hartmann Drive
Lebanon, TN 37037

Century Marketing is an independent distributor of Fibroquest Distributors.

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED